

Some Women of the Mahavamsa

Maureen Seneviratne

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SOME WOMEN OF THE MAHAVAMSA
AND CŪLAVAMSA

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MAUREEN SENEVIRATNE



H. W. CAVE & COMPANY
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PREFACE

“ Their memory is forgotten.
Also their love and their
hatred, and their envy, is
now perished.”

FROM THE ANCIENT CHINESE

WOMAN'S PLACE in ancient Ceylon was an important and revered one. The ancient Chronicles of our country, the Mahavamsa and Culavamsa, give us only a glimpse of some of the women of those times. They describe a variety of women. Mostly of the nobility. For the Mahavamsa is essentially the story of our history and in those far-off days the men and women who created and shaped history were chiefly those of royal blood.

History reveals the high position women held in many affairs, the power and influence some of them wielded, how often they acted as wise counsellors to their men, how much homage and honour was paid to them in their particular spheres.

My source for these portraits are the brief glimpses of these women given in the Mahavamsa and Culavamsa. A wealth of legend and tradition has evolved over the centuries around some of these figures. But what I have endeavoured to do very simply, is to weave a portrait of each of the characters I have chosen, to draw them in close-up as it

were, in a series of short biographies for readers young and old who I hope will be drawn to read the ancient chronicles themselves.

I myself have spent enjoyable, enriching hours breathing life into these intriguing and delightful women, and in the process I have discovered anew for myself the perennial fascination of those ancient texts, which vividly and irresistibly bring back times past into our present.

MAUREEN SENEVIRATNE

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KUVENI

THE FIRST WOMAN native to Lanka mentioned in the Mahavamsa is Kuveni, a princess of the Yakhas. She was the 'witch' who sought to lure Vijaya and his men to disaster on their arrival in Ceylon.

The writer of the Mahavamsa regarded Kuveni as a supernatural being, one of the race of such creatures who the ancients believed, inhabited the island in the days before the coming of the Aryans. He hardly gives us a glimpse of the *woman* she was.

The Aryan migrations to the island are believed to have begun around 800 B.C. and continued sporadically over a period of about three to four hundred years. Ceylon was then inhabited by a primitive race, or rather two such peoples, known as Yakhas and Nagas. The latter appear to have chiefly inhabited the northern and western coasts of the island, and the other lived in the interior. The legends of antiquity describe the Nagas as snake worshippers and the Yakhas as worshippers of demons.

Archaeological discoveries prove that aboriginal tribes existed in Ceylon from early times. These races had evidently not yet reached the advanced Iron Age of civilisation as the Aryans had.

A belief existed in ancient times that these primitive people even resembled the snakes and demons they worshipped. Though very probably a highly exaggerated fancy, this may have accounted for the names given to them by the ancient Sinhalese. It is however very unlikely that the people Vijaya encountered on his arrival in Ceylon were supernatural beings: 'Yakhas' or 'Demons' as the writer of the Mahavamsa makes out.

The Chronicler has transformed Kuveni into an insubstantial thing of magic and mystery. Though he has been unsympathetic to her in his story he has yet succeeded, unconsciously perhaps, in conveying the drama and pathos of her short, sad, defeated life.

Through the mist of myth and legend woven round the tale of her life, Kuveni emerges a woman, who like many others throughout history, betrayed her own people for love of a handsome foreigner, a prince. She paid a bitter penalty for such treachery.

Prince Vijaya, the eldest son of King Sinhabahu of Sihapura in Bengal, was a bold and dissolute youth. He joined his companions in riotous living, causing many a problem to his father's subjects.

"Vijaya was of evil conduct and his followers were even (like himself) and many

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intolerable deeds of violence were done by them."

The people of Sihapura often complained to the king about his son's shocking behaviour. But many stern warnings from the king were ignored by the prince and his friends.

"Angered by this the people told the matter to the king ; the king speaking persuasively to them, severely blamed his son. But all fell out again as before, the second and yet the third time ; and the angered people said to the king : ' Kill thy son. ' "

Sinhabahu had no choice, but rather than have his son put to death, he decided to banish Vijaya and his men and send them into exile. Ships were prepared and the prince and his companions, seven hundred of them with their wives and children, were forced to leave the land of their birth. Before they left the king ordered half their heads shaven as an additional punishment. According to the custom of that land in those times, this signified loss of freedom.

The ships drifted south, along the coast of India, and their course was by no means an even or tranquil one. Very early during the voyage the ships with the women and children were separated from the rest. They landed

on two islands which came to be known as 'Naggadipa', that is Island of Children and 'Mahiladipaka' or Island of Women.

At first Vijaya was also threatened with mutiny by his men. When their ships drifted to a lovely bay, a haven on India's west coast known as Supparaka, he was unable to settle there as he intended, because he found himself in danger of violence by his men, who did not wish to remain in that spot. He was forced to embark once more, and finally the ships reached the shores of Lanka.

Tradition has it that the notable event of the coming of the Sinhalese took place on the day that the "... Tathagatha (Lord Buddha) lay down between the two twin-like sal trees to pass into Nibbana." Meanwhile the gods had taken an interest in the career of this prince. Lord Buddha himself, knowing that Vijaya's descendents would cherish the Buddhist faith in the isle of Lanka, asked god Sakha to ensure the safety of the prince and his followers in their new home.

At the Buddha's bidding Sakha assigned to Vishnu, the powerful lotus-coloured god, second deity of the great Hindu Triumvirate, the task of protecting the founder of the Lion Race in Ceylon. When Vijaya and his companions landed at Tambapanni as they

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called the country of rich-copper-coloured-earth, Vishnu appeared in the guise of a wandering hermit. He blessed the prince and his men with water from his water vessel and wound a magic thread about their arms to protect them from all danger, and disappeared.

Vijaya's sailors were eager to explore the land they had reached after their perilous journey. In spite of their leader's warning, one of the men followed a bitch which appeared on the scene.

Knowing that only in a village are dogs to be found, he duly reached a pond beside which was a fair woman, Kuveni herself, who "... sat at the foot of a tree spinning." She had sent out one of her women in the form of a bitch to lure the man here. He however took her to be some kind of a female recluse, probably because she was alone in that deserted spot.

"When the man saw the pond and the woman-hermit sitting there, he bathed and drank and taking young shoots of lotuses and water in lotus-leaves he came out again. And she said to him : 'Stay. You are my prey !' Then the man stood there as if fast bound."

She was unable to destroy him because of Vishnu's magic charm. But she succeeded

in casting him, and many of his companions who were also lured towards the spot in search of their comrades, into a deep chasm. An awful, dark dungeon where she held them prisoners.

The writer implies that Kuveni, by her magical powers had learned of Vijaya's arrival and that it was her intention to destroy his men. But it was also very likely that she was a spy sent by her people who had heard of the arrival of these strangers. They had perhaps asked her to trap them by means of her beauty and charm and pave the way for them to come in their numbers and destroy the unwelcome visitors.

But Kuveni had not reckoned with the power of Vishnu's magic thread and her own emotional reaction to the commanding presence of the handsome prince.

Vijaya, awaiting the return of his men, became more and more anxious as the hours passed and finally decided to set out in search of them. He armed himself with the "five weapons"—the sword, bow, battle-axe, spear and shield. His steps led him to the pond where he saw the crafty, beautiful woman, spinning quietly under the tree beside it.

It flashed across his mind that she might in some way be responsible for or aware of the mysterious disappearance of his men.

"Surely my men have been seen by this woman," he thought. She was a stranger and may be she had given them up to her own people ; even now perhaps his enemies lurked nearby in the thicket, waiting to capture him.

But Vijaya was a gallant prince and knew his manners. The woman might be a spy but she was also alluring and beautiful to behold and looked like a gentlewoman.

"Lady," he addressed her respectfully, "have you seen my men ?"

Her answer gave her away. "What do you want with your people, prince ? Drink and bathe."

Her voice was warm and soft and seductive. She had at last set eyes on the man she wished to destroy and she found him exceedingly pleasing. She would first entice him by her charms and then deliver him to her people.

When he was addressed by his rank and title, Vijaya could not doubt that she was a sorceress. It did not strike his plain, masculine mind that she was nothing but a creature of supernatural intuition and sharp acumen. He may even have been deeply impressed with her from that moment, though he was too shrewd to display his awe. How simple it would have been for the scheming

Kuveni to have extracted vital information about their leader, from some of his imprisoned followers. But yet Vijaya chose to believe she was a witch !

However, brave man that he was, his next move took Kuveni entirely by surprise. It changed the course of her actions ; perhaps the whole course of her life. Boldly he attacked her :

“ Slave ! Give me back my men or I shall slay you ! ”

The woman instinctively knew she was beaten. This man would not easily succumb to her wiles. She realised he was determined. He could even be ruthless. Terrified, she begged for mercy.

“ Spare my life, sir ; I will give you a kingdom and do you a woman’s service and other service as you please.”

The prince did not immediately realise what a complete victory he had won. Kuveni, who had come to spy on him, to capture him by fair means or foul and hand him over to her people, was now his willing slave, prepared even to betray her own people and her country to the stranger-prince.

She freed his men, brought him food and drink, prepared a tent and bed for him and offered herself as his spouse. From this moment it was she who had placed herself

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under Vijaya's power. There was nothing she would not do for him after her surrender. For Kuveni the die was cast and an ill choice it proved to be.

Infatuated with her prince, Kuveni was now prepared to commit even the gravest crime : the unspeakable betrayal of her people. After more than two millennia a shudder yet creeps over one, at love's terrible power to destroy. She informed the prince that on a certain day her people would gather in their city, Sirisavatthi, to celebrate the wedding of the Yakha chieftain's daughter. She advised Vijaya to choose this opportunity to take them unawares and destroy them.

"For the wedding there is high festival, lasting seven days," she told him, "... a great multitude is gathered together. Even today, do you destroy the Yakhas, for afterwards it will no longer be possible."

And when Vijaya demanded how he could slay supernatural, invisible beings, Kuveni, with tongue in cheek no doubt and a glint in her eye, calmly gave him confidence of his victory : "'Wheresoever they may be, I will utter cries, and where you should hear that sound, strike ! And by my magic power shall your weapon fall upon their bodies.'"

Vijaya, the conquerer and soldier, followed her advice and a great massacre of the

unsuspecting Yakhas took place. The bare handful of pitiful survivors barricaded themselves in another of their cities, Lankapura.

Time passed.

Vijaya's followers colonised the land. They founded cities, built tanks, grew crops. But his ministers began to be restive. It was time, they decided, that Vijaya be consecrated their king. His idyll with the beautiful Yakhini princess did not please them. The great victory they had won over the native population was no doubt due to her, but she was an alien. They hated and feared her power, considered her an evil influence over their prince.

They had never forgiven her for the harsh manner in which she had treated them at first ; never forgotten their bitter, terrifying, humiliating sojourn in the "dark chasm" as her helpless prisoners. To them she was a strange and evil woman, a stumbling block to their own welfare, and they sought some means to get rid of her.

In their worldly wisdom they knew that Vijaya as king would not consider her a desirable consort ; a suitable mother for his royal heirs. Bewitched by her as he was, he was also very ambitious and extremely conscious of his noble birth, and kingly heritage. Their hopes were realised when

“ . . . the prince refused the consecration unless a maiden of noble house were consecrated as queen at the same time.”

The ministers were overjoyed. The moment for swift action had arrived. They did not delay. They sent an embassy with many expensive gifts to the Pandu king of southern India to woo his daughter for their prince.

That king was pleased to bestow his daughter on Vijaya of Lanka. Accompanied by several hundred ladies in waiting she arrived with a number of skilled craftsmen of the eighteen guilds and many splendid presents for her betrothed.

Kuveni's brief sway over her prince was over. She had borne him a son and a daughter and they had lived many years together. They must have had their share of happiness, for it is with words of kindness and deep sorrow that prince Vijaya bids the Yakhini depart from him :

“Go, dear one, leaving the children behind ; men are ever in fear of superhuman beings.” In other words, he tried to tell her that she could never be one with his people ; she would never be accepted by them as his rightful queen.

But it speaks well for the prince that he desired to keep their children. For Kuveni

it was a moment of great bitterness. "She was seized with fear." She begged and prayed the prince to have pity on her. But he had no choice. Her life by now may even have been in danger at his court.

"He said again to the yakhini : 'Delay not ! I will bestow on you an offering by spending a thousand pieces of money.' "

From time immemorial money has been used as an instrument of compensating grievous moral injury.

"When she had besought him again and again in vain she took her two children and departed for Lankapura, though fearing that evil should come of it."

Kuveni, the enchantress, may have well had the natural instincts of a mother, but she also knew the only way she could most hurt the prince in return, was to take away the children he loved. We can imagine she suffered unbearably at this bitter parting from the man she considered her lord, and the life to which she had become accustomed. One cannot but pity the poor outcast.

Lankapura, one would think, was the last place she could go to for succour, but that decision too was typical of the woman. Forsaken by her lover, she remembered her own people. Foolishly she believed her old charm would still help her or else she hoped

to bribe herself back into their favour with the money she received from the prince. And there was a relative of hers who she thought could be persuaded to assist her.

Her fate was sealed. It is considered by some as poetic justice and retribution for her treachery towards her own people.

"She set the children down outside and went herself into that city. When the Yakhas in the city recognised the Yakhini, in their terror they took her for a spy and there was a great stir among them."

The wheel had turned full circle. Her people had not forgotten the part she played in delivering them to their enemies. They remembered her conspiracy with the foreigners and her treachery that had caused their downfall so swiftly and infamously. Because of her they were now slaves and bondsmen to the Aryan conquerers. For what other reason could she have come among them once more, dressed in fine raiment and bearing herself proudly, but to spy on them, to put them into yet greater bondage ?

For it would not have been like Kuveni to creep in and humbly beg for their mercy, whatever were her fears and anxieties. She was a princess and at one time, before the strangers from across the seas had come to change the pattern of her life, she had been

held in great awe and high regard by her people. In her arrogance she did not realise how much they now hated and despised her ; did not reflect that for their own safety they would not hesitate to destroy her.

But the end came unexpectedly.

One man stronger and more impulsive than the rest, accosted her. Loudly he hurled insults at her, denouncing her as the betrayer of her own race : a wanton and evil woman ; demanding the reason for her sudden re-appearance among them. Before Kuveni could speak or defend herself, before anyone could intervene, in his rage and anger, he struck her a single, violent blow with his huge fist. Perhaps he may not have intended it to be fatal. But the blow killed her.

Thus perished the fair Kuveni. Her "magic" had not been potent enough to capture a lasting love and protection of the prince she loved, even though she had sacrificed her honour and betrayed her own people for him. Nor did it save her life.

Her children escaped, the Chronicle tells us, fleeing to the jungles of Adam's Peak, where they grew up and took each other as man and wife, "multiplying with sons and daughters" and where "they dwelt with the king's leave, there in Malayarata (the hill country)."

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Tradition has it that the Veddhas are descended from the offspring of Vijaya and Kuveni.

As for Vijaya—he conformed. He married the Pandu princess in a ceremony of great magnificence. He was consecrated king of Lanka and in turn consecrated his wife as queen and consort, “bestowed wealth and honours on his ministers, sent his father-in-law a shell-pearl of great price each year,” and what is more and greatly lauded by the old Chronicler, forsook “his former evil way of life, ruling over all Lanka in peace and righteousness.”

But perhaps a curse of Kuveni had its effect on his marriage. Vijaya and his queen were not blessed with offspring.

VIHARA MAHA DEVI

ONE OF THE most outstanding figures of the heroic age of Ceylon's history was Vihara Maha Devi. The perfect daughter, wife and mother. The Mahavamsa's shining example of womanhood. With unconcealed pride and pleasure the Chronicler describes her, in a style so different from his mostly taciturn references to women. "Firm in the faith" he extols her ; the "pious and beautiful;" "self-controlled ;" "keen witted ;" "virtuous"—are some of the epithets he uses in the vivid portrait he paints of this queen.

She comes to us in a picture clear and fine-drawn, dispersing the mists of more than twenty centuries ; "a woman without blemish" from the Golden Age.

Vihara Maha Devi was the daughter, wife and mother of kings, the greatest of whom was her son, the renowned Duttugemunu. We cannot however fully appreciate her remarkable role in history, her strong, admirable personality without some understanding of the disturbing political conditions which existed in the Island during the greater part of her lifetime : the turbulent middle years of the second century B.C.

Some decades after King Devanampiya Tissa's death, the first recorded Tamil invasion

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from South India took place. Two brothers, horse dealers and adventurers from the Deccan, overpowered the reigning King Surattissa and took over the country. Though disliked and feared by the populace they ruled for 22 years, before they in turn were conquered by a Sinhala prince Asela, a direct descendant of Devanampiya Tissa.

Asela did not however retain his position for long. A Tamil warrior from the Cola kingdom of South India, Elara by name, crossed over with his army, drove out Asela and established himself as king of the Rajarata : north and north central Ceylon.

Curiously, this Elara secured for himself a lasting place in our annals and won the affection of his subjects with his deep sense of justice, his tolerance for the Buddhist faith and his mercy and magnanimity towards all living creatures.

The Sinhala dynasty descended from Devanampiya Tissa's younger brother, Mahanaga the vice-regent, had in the meantime established itself in Ruhuna, south Ceylon. Mahanaga had fled there during his royal brother's lifetime, the victim of a plot hatched by his sister-in-law, who had sought to oust him from the succession. At the time the present narrative begins, Kavantissa, great grandson of Mahanaga, reigned in Ruhuna, claiming

suzerainty over the entire southern and western regions of Lanka. His capital city was Mahagama, one of the few unwallled cities of ancient Ceylon. However a number of petty kingdoms had sprung up in this part of the island, their rulers paying but nominal allegiance to Ruhuna's overlord.

In Kelaniya on the west coast, a settlement far-famed from earliest times, and sanctified by a visit of Lord Buddha himself during his lifetime, King Kelani Tissa held sway. His daughter, Devi was she, who subsequently, by a singular and strange train of circumstances, came to be known as Vihara Maha Devi, and became queen of Ruhuna.

The Mahavamsa deals very briefly with the drama of the grim incident that resulted in her being cast into the sea in a rudderless boat ; a victim to the gods in propitiation for her father's rash and unspeakable crime.

It seems the queen of Kelani Tissa had been unfaithful to her lord, carrying on a shameless intrigue with his younger brother, prince Ayya Uttika, who dwelt in the palace. When the king became aware of the shocking, sordid affair, he banished his erring brother and severely chastised his faithless queen. Uttika however kept in touch with the queen, and on one occasion sent her a letter by a messenger disguised as a bhikkhu.

“This man went thither and took his stand at the king’s door and entered the king’s house with an arahant who always used to take his meal at the palace, unnoticed by that therā.”

Once he had found his way into the palace, the messenger bided his time, eating and drinking with the rest, waiting for a suitable opportunity to deliver the letter to the queen. Both king and queen attended on the bhikkhus to whom they served this midday meal, and when it had finished the king prepared to leave the chamber ahead of the queen. The man now caught the queen’s attention and quietly dropped the scroll at her feet.

But the keen ears of the king caught the faint rustling sound. Discovering the written message he pounced on it and “. . . raged unthinking, against the therā, and in his fury he caused the therā and the man to be slain and thrown into the sea.”

This cruel and unjust action brought the wrath of the outraged gods upon the kingdom of Kelani. The angry deities of the sea wreaked havoc and devastation in the land. Floods and cyclones destroyed whole villages, crops were ruined and many hundreds of people were swept away by the swollen, turbulent waters. The suffering folk appealed to the king—author of their misfortunes—to

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appease the gods by some meritorious deed before the sea totally swallowed up the land.

Soothsayers advised the king that the sacrifice of his own, well-beloved daughter alone, would appease the divine beings. Loath to slay his child, but hardly having any choice, he contrived to set her adrift on the wild, raging sea.

“The king with all speed caused his pious and beautiful daughter named Devi, to be placed in a golden vessel, whereon was written ‘a king’s daughter’ and to be launched upon that same sea.”

It would have taken courage of a high order and great faith on the part of an untried young girl to have consented to offer herself in this manner as a victim to the gods, princess though she was and bred in a tradition of service. But Devi accepted the role she was cast in. From her earliest years she was conscious of the duties attached to her high position and scrupulous in carrying them out. For the sake of her battered country and its suffering people she cooperated in offering herself to the gods.

She must have known the sad story of her mother’s infidelity, her father’s blind, jealous fury and his grave impulsive act of violence against the holy arahant, whom he had

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unjustly suspected of aiding and abetting his disloyal queen.

Her heart must certainly have quaked at the thought of a watery grave. Which young girl's would not ? But if she did, it is highly probable her sighs and tears were known and audible only to herself.

In the sketchy tale Devi emerges calm and unflinching, taking her place with great dignity in the golden boat as it tossed on a stormy sea, ready to die for her people.

Only a woman of her calibre could be the mother of a warrior-hero such as Duttugemunu. Who but a son of hers could have become Lanka's hero-king ?

What her thoughts were as she sat, spray-drenched and solitary in her small, storm-tossed skiff, battling the great ocean, we can only guess. But Devi did not die. Her boat drifted to the south of Ceylon and came ashore near a vihara in the kingdom of Ruhuna. The beach at Kirinda is yet pointed to with pride by its inhabitants, as the place of Devi's landing.

Kavantissa, ruler of those domains, was soon listening entranced to her tale of supreme courage. Proudly he had her consecrated as his queen, giving her the name Vihara Maha Devi, because she had landed near the vihara.

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The queen's life was pervaded throughout with a rare piety and a ceaseless care and concern for the Brotherhood. It was as if she could not sufficiently recompense them for the cruel act committed by her angry father against one of them. She reared her two sons in this same spirit of dedication to the Dhamma and the Sangha, so much so that the dying Duttugemunu was able to exclaim : " Twenty four years (the period of his reign) have I been a patron of the Brotherhood and my body also shall be a patron of the Brotherhood ! "

Vihara Maha Devi lived happily with her husband, doing good to her subjects and the Brotherhood, devoted to the king and her royal duties. But there was one sorrow she bore in the depths of her heart to which she rarely gave expression.

It was her daily practice to give alms to the bhikkhus in the form of a lavish mid-day meal served to them in the palace hall. After the meal she would take gifts of perfume, flowers, medicines and clothing and go to the arama to distribute these herself to the holy theras.

On one such occasion, the chief thera of the vihara, after expounding the doctrine to her, spoke to her :

VIHARA MAHA DEVI

“ Your great happiness you have attained by works of merit ; even now must you not grow weary of performing works of merit. ”

Her reply is revealing :

“ What is our happiness here, since we have no children ? Lo, our happiness is therefore barren ! ”

On hearing this, the chief therā was moved to advise the queen to seek out and consult a certain, ailing samenera, requesting the holy one who was close to death, to be reborn as her son. The grateful queen duly made the journey to the samenera's abode. The ascetic, impressed by her deep piety, the charitable deeds she performed, consented, “ desiring rebirth for himself in the king's family. ”

When the saintly samenera died both king and queen reverently performed his obsequies. Some time later Vihara Maha Devi discovered to her great joy that she was with child.

The ancient writer becomes irresistibly human when he writes of Duttugemunu's mother. He relates fascinating stories about her peculiar cravings during the nine months she bore her son in her womb. It is said that she once expressed a strange craving for honey, but it was not just any honey that Vihara Maha Devi desired.

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“While making a pillow for her head of a honeycomb one usabha (ancient measure) long, and resting on her left side in her beautiful bed, she should eat the honey that remained when she had given twelve thousand bhikkhus to eat.”

Yet again the queen “. . . longed to drink the water that had served to cleanse the sword with which the head of the first warrior among King Elara's warriors had been struck off and she longed to drink it standing on her head.” She also told her husband wistfully that she had a great yearning “to adorn herself with garlands of unfaded lotus blossoms brought from the lotus marshes of Anuradhapura.”

The king, worried and perturbed by his wife's cravings, yet loath to refuse her anything in her present state of health, was anxious as at all times to please her and fulfil her strange requests. He consulted the palace soothsayers. These wise men read in the queen's peculiar cravings the great future for the child she carried. Exultantly they informed the king :

“The queen's son, when he has conquered the Damilas and built up an united kingdom, will make the doctrine to shine forth brightly.”

Vihara Maha Devi's unusual demands were all satisfied by some means or other. After

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the king had issued a proclamation that anyone finding such a honeycomb would be duly rewarded, a countryman of those parts discovered a boat turned upside-down in which the bees had built a giant comb, honey-filled and discarded. The queen was conducted there by her royal husband who had built a "beautifully prepared pavilion" over the spot, where she ate the honey in the manner she desired.

The king's warrior Velusumana was entrusted with the task of satisfying the other cravings of the queen. The wily Velusumana took off for Anuradhapura where he worked himself into the good graces and secured the trust of King Elara's state-horsekeeper. Soon he was able to gather the exquisite lotuses from the royal marshes as desired by his queen. What is more he then successfully made his escape from the city, mounted on no less than Elara's own state-horse !

The furious king, on discovering how his horsekeeper had been tricked, commanded his first warrior to pursue Velusumana and bring him back captive. But the bold soldier from the south "... hid himself in the jungle, drew the sword and stretched it towards his pursuer. Thereby his head, as he came on, so swiftly as the horse could, severed from the trunk."

Triumphantly Velusumana returned to Mahagama bearing the prizes he acquired. The queen, well pleased, was able to satisfy her cravings and a grateful king heaped honours on him.

These stories, fantastic though they may seem, symbolise Vihara Maha Devi's unhappiness at the knowledge that her son would be born into a divided country. Her strange demands also give us an insight into her character. Unlike her peace-loving husband she had not accepted the political pattern of her times. She rebelled within herself at the shame and defeat that had befallen the proud, ancient kingdom of Lanka, and longed in her resolute, woman's heart for a son, who would deliver her people from their bondage to a foreign invader.

In due course she bore "a noble son endowed with all the auspicious signs"—and named him Gamani. Shortly after another son, Tissa, was born to her. From the few brief sentences which the Chronicle devotes to their childhood, we gather that their mother moulded them into strong, loyal and patriotic princes, dedicated to the service of Buddhism and their country.

"At that festival time of the presenting of the first rice-foods to both children the king, full of pious zeal set rice-milk before five

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hundred bhikkhus, he when the half had been eaten by them, did together with the queen take a little in a golden spoon and give it to them with the words : ‘ If you my sons abandon the doctrine of Sambuddha then shall this not be digested in your belly.’

When they were twelve and ten years of age, at another great feast to the Brotherhood held in the palace, their father enjoined them “ never to turn away from the bhikkhus, the guardian spirits of our house.” Their mother rejoiced to see that both boys willingly acquiesced. The king then warned his two sons never to be at “ enmity one toward another.” How happy they made her when they affectionately took this pledge. But when their father ordered them never to fight with the invader, both young princes sturdily refused to give such an undertaking. They flung away their food and Gamani “ went to his bed and drawing in his hands and feet, lay upon the bed . . . ”

The mother’s heart ached to see her son unhappy, because more so than her peace-loving husband she understood its cause. Carressing him, all her tenderness aroused, she asked him : “ Why do you not lie easily upon your bed with limbs outstretched, my son ? ”

Gamani's famous reply rings down the ages with passionate fervour, thrilling us as it must surely have done his mother : "Over beyond the Ganga are the Damilas, here on this side is the ocean, how can I lie with outstretched limbs ?"

When their sons grew to manhood "skilled in guiding elephants and horses, and in bearing the sword and versed in archery," the old king apportioned to them particular duties. Gamani, the heir-apparent, remained in Mahagama learning the art of government, taking charge of the vast army his father had built and Tissa was despatched with troops to guard the eastern frontier, with his headquarters at Dighavapi, the present Gal-oya region.

Gamani, young and filled with a passionate resolve to destroy the invader, was eager to begin his campaign against Elara, but Kavan-tissa, fearful of his son's safety, was opposed to haste. Angered by what he impulsively considered his father's cowardice, Gamani sent the king a woman's ornaments, saying : "If my father were a man he would not speak thus : therefore shall he put this on."

The king, enraged by his son's impudence, sought to restrain the youth, but Gamani escaped and fled to the jungles of Malayarata, the central hills. There he remained until the

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time of his father's death. Because of his anger with his father the prince came to be known as "Dutu-Gamani," the angry Gamani or Dutugemunu. Vihara Maha Devi's grief and anxiety at this quarrel between father and son, both of whom she deeply loved, is not recorded in the ancient text, but we cannot doubt that she suffered greatly during this time, torn between love for her son and loyalty to her husband.

When her husband died, the queen took his body in a carriage to the Brotherhood in Tissamaharama. Tissa reaching there first, performed the funeral rites on his father, after which he took his mother and his brother's war-elephant, Kandula, and returned with them to his palace at Dighavapi.

Duttugemunu was astounded when he learned on his arrival at Mahagama, of his brother's high-handed action. The rightful heir, he levied his warriors and proceeded to do battle with Tissa. Vihara Maha Devi once again was sorrow-stricken ; tortured with agony and pain of mind over this unfortunate quarrel between her beloved sons.

True to a pledge they had taken at the insistence of the old king, that they would never battle in a war between the two royal brothers, the warriors of both princes gave

them only half-hearted support. The Brotherhood too tactfully intervened and succeeded in effecting a reconciliation between the princes. Tissa was overcome in the manoeuvres that took place and Duttugemunu won back his mother and favourite elephant, and secured his kingdom. He returned to the palace at Mahagama bringing his mother "whom he greatly revered."

Vihara Maha Devi in a touching note of poignancy stood by her erring younger son when, duly chastened, he appeared before his brother the king, to make peace with him. She "hurried there and stood sheltering her young son . . ." as mothers from time immemorial have done, sheltering the weak against the strong ; protecting the culprit from the just punishment that is due ; interceding on his behalf ; softening the blow. In this sensitive, revealing incident Vihara Maha Devi is all mother.

Soon after, "having provided for his people," Duttugemunu set out on his campaign, followed by his "chariots, troops and beasts for riders," accompanied by his mother who rode beside him, sharing all his perils. During the long, difficult months that followed, she gave him unsparingly of her advice and direction, participated in his setbacks and triumphs, his worries and anxieties,

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helped him resolve the many problems that confronted him day after day.

Vihara Maha Devi, at all times a wise and intelligent woman, also had some knowledge of the tactics of war, the manoeuvres of the battlefield, and her son always had the highest regard for his mother's opinions.

Before the great battle with Elara's army, Duttugemunu "took counsel with his mother, and by her counsel formed thirty-two bodies of troops." She advised him to set up effigies of himself at a number of vantage points on the field, with a royal umbrella held over each, to distract and exhaust Elara's chief warrior Dighanjatu who had sworn to destroy the Sinhala king. Her strategy was sound. By the time the Damila reached the king, he was worn out and easily fell a victim to his enemy's sword.

The Mahavamsa makes no mention of this noble queen after her son's great victory. She had brought forth one of the greatest rulers of this land, infused him with her own indomitable will and spirit and stayed steadfastly by his side through all the vicissitudes of the long, arduous years of campaigning, endured considerable periods of toil and hardship in the rough camps of war, known fierce battles and weary sieges in their tireless

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efforts to drive the Colas from Lanka, and unite the country under Duttugemunu's proud banner.

Tradition has it that she lived to witness and share in his crowning achievement and celebrate the unique event. Hers was a place of pride and honour beside her beloved son, and she remained his trusted confidante and wise counsellor in the quiet years of peace that followed, as she had been in times of war and stress.

SANGHAMITTA

THE GREAT SHIP came triumphantly into the port of Jambukola in North Ceylon, identified by some as the bay of Sampalaturai Point in the Jaffna Peninsula. Twelve women clad in saffron robes, their arms neatly folded across their breasts, their faces expressing an inner joy and serenity, stood sedate and dignified on the deck. One of them, noble, even majestic in her bearing, a look of singular piety on her countenance, stepped forward. She bore beside her a large, golden vessel, richly wrought, from which sprouted a fresh, green sapling.

On the shore was a mass of people, uttering loud, hearty cries of welcome. The great and famous and important men and women of the kingdom, together with hundreds of simple, common folk, were gathered to greet her. No less than the king himself and his glittering royal retinue were present in all their splendour.

The woman's dark eyes quietly searched the crowd for a few moments and a soft smile hovered in their depths as they rested on two dearly beloved faces : her brother Thera Mahinda and her son Samenera Sumana. They were among the royal party, close beside the king. They had joined the

others to welcome her. Her heart rejoiced at the thought of her reunion with them.

Her eyes wandered over the colourful scene. Pomp and formal ceremonial were evident everywhere. Flags and pennants waved in the breeze. The pier was sprinkled with glittering white sand. Festoons of blossoms decorated the jetty. The steps of the landing were covered with clean white cloth. Drums beat a lively tattoo of greeting and flutes swirled and sounded on the pungent, salty air.

The Princess Sanghamitta saw—and her heart was gladdened. The King of Lanka and his people had prepared a most magnificent and fitting welcome for the priceless object she bore with her : the branch of the sacred Bodhi-tree at Gaya, under which Lord Buddha had received Enlightenment. A gift from her father, the Emperor Asoka of India, to his dear friend and contemporary, Devanampiya Tissa of Lanka.

The story of Sanghamitta is most edifying. She herself had received ordination as a bhikkhuni at the same time as her brother Mahinda, shortly after her husband, Prince Aggibrahma had renounced the world. It was a time when men and women, following the example of their emperor, were filled with a profound sense of piety and devotion to

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their religion. A spiritual renaissance, initiated by Emperor Asoka, swept the kingdom of Magadha. Many sought chiefly the things of the spirit and were willing, ever eager to reject material wealth and position, in their zeal to live worthily according to the precepts of Lord Buddha.

A marvellous transformation had been wrought in the life of Asoka himself. He was the grandson of the renowned and redoubtable Candragupta Maurya, the prince who had wielded together one vast kingdom out of a number of petty states in northern India. Asoka's father, King Bindusara, is said to have had a hundred and one sons.

"Asoka stood high above them all in valour, splendour, might and wondrous powers. He, when he had slain his ninety-nine brothers born of different mothers, won the undivided sovereignty over all Jambudipa . . . and raised his youngest brother, son of his own mother to the office of vice-regent."

He was then feared by his subjects and known as Candasoka, the Wicked Asoka for all the evil he had committed.

However a few years after his consecration, Asoka was converted to Buddhism, by his nephew the Samanera Nigrodha whose father, Sumitta, had been slain by Asoka. There was now a great and wonderful metamorphosis

in the character of the emperor. He now won fame for the good deeds he performed, for his exemplary charity, the humane methods of government and social services he initiated, and his benign kindness to all men and beasts in his kingdom. The welfare of his people became his primary concern and his beneficent edicts were carried out far and wide in the kingdom, bringing peace and prosperity to all.

More than anything, Asoka was fired with a burning zeal to spread the teachings of the Buddha in every corner of the land, and even beyond its boundaries. He called the Third Buddhist Council in his capital city of Pataliputra. To the Council he invited the great therā Moggaliputta Tissa and a thousand other bhikkhus, to settle what were the true doctrines of the Buddha. One of the most important decisions taken at this Council was to send missionaries to preach Buddhism not only in the outposts of Asoka's own Mauryan Empire, but in the whole of South East Asia.

Because of all these visible manifestations of his moral upliftment, the emperor came to be called Dhammasoka by his grateful people.

After his consecration as emperor, his two children Mahinda and Sanghamitta lived with him in his great palace at Pataliputra. There they were reared in the sumptuous

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luxury and comfort of a royal household, educated in the best traditions of their state, and showered with many of the good things of life, from their earliest years. All this only made their final renunciation of worldly wealth and position even more remarkable.

Greatly fired with the spirit of the age, they were among those of the emperor's nearest kin, who in time, enthusiastically accepted ordination, and curiously carved out immortality for themselves by this action.

Sanghamitta grew and developed in the refined culture of the pious Mauryan court. At a tender age, as was the custom of the time in her country, she was given in marriage to her father's nephew, Prince Aggribrahma. One son was born of their union, the renowned Sumana, who later won fame and distinction as the messenger of Thera Mahinda, and the carrier of the sacred relics of Lord Buddha for enshrinement in Ceylon.

On a certain uposatha-day the emperor paid reverence to the faith and to the bhikkhus gathered at his splendid, newly-built "Asokarama." The devout and learned Thera Moggaliputta Tissa was present and praised the king for his lavish generosity towards the religion. The emperor anxious to be reassured that the guilt of his earlier crimes had

been mitigated by the piety of his present conduct spoke to the therā :

“ Is there a kinsman of Buddha’s religion like unto me ? ”

To which the therā, “. . . having perceived the destiny of the king’s son Mahinda and his daughter Sanghamitta, and foreseen the progress of the doctrine that was to arise from them . . . ” replied :

“ Even a lavish giver of gifts like unto thee is not a kinsman of the religion : giver of wealth is he called, O ruler of men. But he who let his son or daughter enter the religious order is kinsman of the religion and withal a giver of gifts.”

Whereupon the emperor turned to his two children who stood near by and asked them :

“ Do you wish to receive the pabbajja (ordination) dear ones ? The pabbajja is held to be a great good.”

Joyfully they consented.

“ This very day we would fain enter the Order, if thou dost wish it ; for us, even as for thee, will blessing come of our pabbajja.”

Ever since her husband, Prince Aggibrahma had entered the Order with the Vice-regent Tissa, Sanghamitta had longed and resolved to take upon herself what her brother Mahinda described as “ the greater dignity.” With all solemnity therefore the two were

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ordained. Sanghamitta was then eighteen years old. As she was not of the prescribed age, she was placed under the care and guidance of a teacher. The directress of the nunnery was the learned and distinguished Dhammapala and her teacher was the pious Ayupala. "In time she became free of the asavas," and became well versed in all aspects of the Dhamma, soon attaining great sanctity.

After some time the emperor entrusted the mission to Ceylon to his son the saintly Mahinda, charging him to "... found in the lovely island of Lanka, the lovely religion of the Conqueror."

The ancient Chronicler has praised the noble nature and rare qualities of Sanghamitta. But what strikes us forcibly is not only her extreme piety, her wisdom, and her unflinching adherence to the Buddha's teachings, but also her supreme sense of duty. Who better than her brother, Thera Mahinda, already reaping rich spiritual rewards of his mission in Lanka, would be aware of the singular dedication to duty which was an intrinsic trait in his sister's character?

When King Devanampiya Tissa had made a request that his sister-in-law and 500 other women be ordained, Mahinda realised it was time to send for Theri Sanghamitta, to toil

in his newly-sown missionary fields. When the king wished for a branch of the sacred Bodhi-tree to be enshrined in Lanka, Mahinda knew that no one would perform the momentous task more scrupulously than his sister.

The description of the scene when Mahinda's request reached the emperor, constitutes some of the most human and touching passages in the Mahavamsa.

The emperor on receiving his son's message turned to his daughter in sorrow ; as any fond father would :

“ How shall I, when I no longer behold thee, dear one, master the grief aroused by the parting with son and grandson ? ”

Sanghamitta answered with fire and fervour and passionate resolve :

“ Weighty is your word, O great King ; many are there that must receive the pabbajja ; therefore I must depart. . . . Your words are well worthy of attention my king and my father, but now has come a moment when a greater duty beckons. From the land of your dearest mission, your son sends word to his sister ; it is a greater command than yours, because the Lord Buddha's work awaits me in Lanka and I must hasten. There are holy women impatient for my coming, waiting to receive the pabbajja, so I must

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hearken the call and we are both sufficiently brave to bear the parting my father, when it is duty that commands me."

There is no hint of hesitation or prevarication in her words. She had submerged whatever natural fears she might have had of a long journey to a strange land and life thereafter among a strange people, proving courage and displaying a spirit fully awakened to a purpose and a mission in life. In all her endeavours Sanghamitta put herself last in her calculations.

In Sanghamitta's lifetime women in India and Ceylon held a position of great dignity. Lord Buddha had at all times regarded men and women as equal although different in their very nature, with different roles to fulfil in life. The active work of both religion and statesmanship was carried out by men, but women had an important place in society, both religious and secular.

It is therefore a great tribute to her exceptional qualities that Sanghamitta was chosen to convey to Lanka one of the most precious relics of Buddhism. She embarked on a splendid ship to make her journey to Ceylon, accompanied by Mahariththa, Devanampiya Tissa's nephew and envoy to the emperor ; eleven other bhikkhunis ; eighteen royal persons appointed by the emperor ; diverse

craftsmen and others to tend the Sacred Tree in its new home.

“A yojana around the waves of the great ocean were stilled. Lotus flowers of the five colours blossomed all around and manifold instruments of music resounded in the air.”

The journey to Lanka was an eventful one. The devas provided many offerings to the Sacred Tree and the nagas by their magical powers sought to take possession of the precious object. But Sanghamitta remaining calm and fearless, terrified the great snakes with her own super-normal powers.

“They then betook themselves to the great theri with entreaties and when they had escorted the great Bodhi-tree from thence to the realm of the serpents and had worshipped it for a week (bestowing on it) the kingship of the nagas and by manifold offerings, they brought it again and set it upon the ship.”

Sanghamitta reached her destination. From Jambukola the sacred Bodhi-tree was borne in procession to Anuradhapura, to a spot set apart for it in the Mahamega Gardens. Sanghamitta and her bhikkhunis were present in a place of honour at its planting, and witnessed the awesome miracles that took place in the city on that great occasion. After this, she performed the ceremony of

ordination on Queen Anula and five hundred women.

She then settled down in Anuradhapura, making her headquarters for a time at the Upasika vihara, a nunnery built by the king for the bhikkhunis.

It was in the precincts of this vihara that she caused twelve other large buildings to be erected. In three of these she had deposited the mast, rudder and helm of the ship in which she had travelled from her homeland, bringing the sacred Bodhi-tree. These severally bore the names Culaganagara, Mahaganagara, and Sirivaddhagara; but were afterwards collectively designated Kupayatthithapitaghara : "House where the mast and so forth is set up."

For over a thousand years pilgrims from all parts of the island, as well as from other lands, visited this shrine to honour the memory of a great and noble woman.

When after some years the Upasika vihara became crowded with many hundreds of bhikkunis, Sanghamitta sought to live in an atmosphere of greater quiet. As the years passed, her life of vigorous action changed gradually into one of more mystic meditation.

"The great Theri Sanghamitta, who longed for a quiet dwelling-place, because of the too

great crowding of the vihara where she dwelt, she who was mindful for the progress of the doctrine and the good of the bhikkhunis, the wise one who desired another abode for the bhikkhunis went once to the fair cetiya house, pleasant by its remoteness, and she the skilled (in choice) of dwelling-places, stayed the day through."

It so happened that on that particular day the king paid a visit to the theri at the vihara. When he found that she had gone thither, he too went to that spot and in the course of conversation learned that she desired to have another vihara built for her there. Devanampiya Tissa therefore had a pleasing vihara erected in the retiring spot she had chosen, amidst a cool, flower-filled grotto. It came to be known later as the Matthalhaka-vihara because of the royal elephant post that had stood there originally.

After a long and fruitful life in the land of her adoption, a year after her brother's death, at the age of fifty-nine, Theri Sanghamitta "... the well beloved ... of lofty wisdom ... passed into Nibbana."

Devanampiya Tissa's brother, King Uttiya reigned over Lanka at the time. He commanded supreme honours of burial lasting a week through, for Sanghamitta, even as it had been accorded her noble, pious brother.

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“The whole of Lanka was adorned . . .” for the sorrowing monarch and his subjects were eager to do all possible homage to one who had dedicated her life in service to them and her religion.

The body of Sanghamitta, was cremated in sight of the Sacred Tree she had brought to Lanka on a spot chosen by her during her lifetime. The king had a monument erected at the place, which remained an object of veneration for many centuries.

MAHAMATTA

A GEM in miniature is the portrait the Mahavamsa has created of Mahamatta, the wise and virtuous maiden who became the daughter-in-law of Vasabha, a famous king of the Greater Dynasty. One of the most attractive women of the Mahavamsa, her character, her charm and beauty and nobility glimmers like a rich jewel through the violent, turbulent times of her era. Though she became queen of Lanka, it is well to reflect that the kind and gentle Mahamatta was of low birth. Her story, which is the very antithesis of that of the infamous Anula, proves that good qualities have little to do with high birth, noble descent or royal blood.

Mahamatta was the daughter of the usurper Subha, who became king in a most ingenious manner, merely through his resemblance to the reigning monarch and his own expediency.

Subha had inherited his father's duties as gate-watchman or door-keeper of the royal palace. The king, Yasalakatissa, was a jovial monarch and he soon noticed that his humble door-keeper bore an extraordinary resemblance to himself. Possessed of a rich sense of humour and eager to play lively practical jokes on his courtiers, the king hit upon a hilarious scheme.

“ . . . This palace-guard Subha did the King Yasalaka, in jest, bedeck with royal ornaments, and place upon the throne and binding the guard's turban about his own head and taking himself his place, staff in hand, at the gate, he made merry over the ministers as they paid homage to Subha sitting on the throne. This was he wont to do from time to time.”

But a joke can be carried too far, and this one certainly was. The wily gate-keeper fancied his exciting new role only too well to relinquish it, as and when the monarch wished.

“ Why does this guard laugh in my presence ? ” Subha demanded regally one day, of an astonished court.

Yasalakatissa may have sensed his impending doom but he was powerless in this predicament to prevent the disaster he had brought upon himself, by his own overdone sense of fun.

In a bold coup Subha took over the kingdom for himself, and ordered that Yasalakatissa be slain. It was a pathetic and farcical end to the ancient royal line of Lanka. But whatever the truth of his clever ruse, it seems probable that Subha had strong support for his claim among the ruling party.

For some time there had been great turmoil in the Court, and strife among members of the royal family as well as the nobility. Only three decades earlier some members of the Lambakanna clan had set themselves in opposition to the reigning king and had even succeeded in driving him into exile in South India, while they administered the government. The king in question, Illanga, father of Yasalakatissa, returned some years later with a strong army from Ruhuna, to win back his kingdom. With the help of his South Indian allies he was able to defeat the rebels. He cruelly punished the Lambakanna nobles who had led the rebellion, though at his mother's bidding he did not execute them, ordering instead that their noses and toes be cut off.

Illanga's son Candamuka Siva who took over the sovereignty after his father's death, had reigned barely nine years when he was murdered by his own younger brother during a water-festival held in the Tissa-weva. By such a bloody act had Yasalakatissa become king.

All this crime, intrigue and lawlessness had weakened the monarchy and among those closest to the king were to be found his bitterest enemies, who doubtless awaited a suitable opportunity to destroy him, and

place one of their own puppet-kings on the throne.

Besides, who can tell whether the remarkable physical likeness Subha bore to the rightful monarch was not purely an accident ? Could he have been in some way, even distantly, illegitimately, connected by blood with Yasalakatissa ?

The fact was that his sovereignty was recognised by many who were very close to the throne, as well as by the ministers. Though he was finally ousted and killed by a Lambakanna prince, not all leaders of the clan were opposed to him. Indeed his stoutest, most loyal servitor was the senapati, who was himself a Lambakanna nobleman. In spite of having won his kingdom by a jest, Subharaja as he called himself, reigned for six years, although precariously, having caused the extinction of the ancient Vijayan dynasty.

Subha's bold action acquired royal status for himself and his daughter Mahamatta. Though her personal feelings regarding this sudden and extravagant elevation can only be surmised. In any event she must have been a very young child at the time. But the impression conveyed is that as she grew up Mahamatta became an unaffected, thoughtful girl who filled her exalted role with extraordinary competence and continued to

remain unimpressed and untouched by the subsequent vagaries of her fortunes.

For six years she was a royal princess, flattered and feted by a fickle, insincere court, living a life of ease and luxury in the royal palace. Then her father met his gory end. Vasabha, a prince of the Lambakannas, of whom it had twice been foretold he would rule, came to the gates of the city at the head of a vast army, having conquered all before him exactly as it had been predicted. Subha remembered wistfully how he had sought to destroy all those bearing the hated name Vasabha, but how this prince alone had escaped his wrath.

Now faced with ruin Subha did not flee. He decided to make a fight for the kingdom he had so craftily obtained ; for the high dignity of a position he now looked upon as his right. He trembled only for the fate of his little daughter, lying heavily guarded in the palace. Knowing how fortunes of war were unpredictable, he decided to ensure the safety of this child he dearly loved, before he faced his opponent in battle.

There was a brick-worker, a man of lowly station like he himself had once been. The man had been his friend, when he too had dwelt in the humbler districts beyond the city. Often after his daily watchman's duties

at the palace, he had visited his friend's home on the Street of the Sun-dried Brick-workers, and the two had chewed betel companionably together while they discoursed on many subjects of interest to both, or while Subha related the latest practical joke his irrepressible monarch had played on the pompous ministers. It had not been possible to maintain the old friendship at its same level or with its full warmth during these six, crowded, anxious years, but the brick-worker was an honest and reliable man and he would care for the girl as if she was his own.

With grief and heaviness of heart he parted from her, enjoining his friend to guard and cherish his beloved child. He also gave the brick-worker his mantle and royal insignia to preserve, to prove at any future time if necessary, his daughter's royal status.

"When he (Subha) was killed by Vasabha, the brickworker took her (Mahamatta) with him, put her in the place of a daughter and brought her to his house."

The gentle girl, bewildered by her change of fortunes and grieved by her father's death, was yet relieved that at last the insecurity and uncertainty she had endured in the past six years was ended. Her foster father was kind to her and she soon came to look upon him

with love and affection. She attended diligently to the household tasks and prepared his meals. "When he was at work the girl used to bring him his food."

A certain episode reveals her piety and her deep concern for the Brotherhood ; her boundless compassion for all weak creatures. One day while taking food to her foster father she saw in a flowering thicket nearby, an ascetic worn-out by long penance and fast, " who was in the seventh state of nirodha (trance)."

Practical and sensible girl that she was, Mahamatta immediately realised the man was faint with hunger and gave him the food she carried with her. She then prepared fresh food for the brickworker, who upon learning the cause of the unusual delay was overjoyed to hear of the generosity and warm sympathy she had displayed to the Thera. He bade her offer food daily to the holy man.

"When the Thera came out of his trance he said to the maiden, looking into the future 'When royal rank has fallen to thy lot, then bethink thee, O maiden, of this place.' And forthwith the Thera died."

The gift of prophecy had overtaken the ascetic in his last moments, for very soon his words were to come to pass.

Meanwhile Vasabha and his queen Pottha

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reigned in great splendour in the royal palace. The time came when they sought a fitting wife for their son, the heir to the throne. Vasabha was determined that the girl chosen for this high honour should be as good as she was beautiful ; pious and virtuous and noble in both bearing and character. His officers scoured the kingdom for such a one.

Mahamatta's neighbours had already noticed the auspicious signs plainly visible in the demeanour of the brick-worker's adopted daughter. They could not help but see how kind and gentle she was ; how generous and charitable and exceedingly fair. They realised she was eminently fitted to be the yuvarajah's consort.

Word reached the king about her and one day a deputation of great noblemen in all their dazzling state came to the unpretentious Street of the Sun-Dried Brick-workers to formally escort the humble artisan's ward to the royal palace. The neighbours rejoicing at her good fortune gaped in wide-eyed astonishment and pressed forward to wish her every blessing.

The brick-worker himself made ready to accompany her, convinced that the girl was at last receiving the homage and preference that were her due. To prove to the king that she was not merely the offspring of a

rude workman, and to maintain his claim, he took with him the treasures Subharaja had deposited in his safe-keeping years before. Proudly he produced the precious royal articles, when the two of them were ushered into the royal presence.

“The king rejoiced and gave her in marriage to his son when all had been duly provided.”

In a splendid ceremony, amidst island-wide rejoicing, Mahamatta was wedded to Prince Vankanasikatissa. Some years later, after the old king died, the young couple were consecrated king and queen of Lanka.

Mahamatta did not forget the words of the holy therā. When her husband became king she herself began to collect the funds needed to build a vihāra on the site where the ascetic had foretold her royal future.

Vankanasikatissa's reign was a short one of three years, but after his death Mahamatta had the joy of seeing her son, Gajabukagamani, raised to the sovereignty. One of Lanka's most renowned and remarkable kings, his name enshrined in legend and song and story for centuries after his time, he was a dutiful and worthy son of his noble mother.

Mother and son together built a magnificent vihāra and its adjoining stupa in the appointed spot. “Hearkening to his mother's word the king founded the Matuvihāra on

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the place of the thicket of the flowering kadambas, in honour of his mother . . .”

It was naturally a place of special significance to her. Mahamatta bought the land on which the vihara was built and her son built the shrine and monastery, as well as making provision for the upkeep of the bhikkhu community in residence there.

Mahamatta may have been the daughter of a wily and cruel father, who by a trick won the kingdom of Lanka and a brief spell of precarious glory for himself. But in herself she was a noble and kindly woman, whose good actions merit a worthy place in Ceylon history.

UMMADACITTA

THROUGHOUT history certain women seem to have been born with the hand of fate lying heavily upon them. They appear to be singled out by the forces of destiny for a special and spectacular role. Such a woman was Lanka's princess Citta, mother of the great King Pandukabhaya, who ruled Ceylon in pre-Buddhist times.

Pandukabhaya was the first king of Lanka to make Anuradhapura his royal capital. He planned and laid it out in such a manner that it excited the imagination of all who visited the picturesque city. A famous hero whose exploits and achievements are enshrined in many old legends and folk tales, Pandukabhaya reigned full seventy years. But he would never have lived to be king, yet alone acquire such lasting fame and glory in his country's annals, but for the wit, cunning and boldness of his mother.

Citta was the daughter of King Panduvasadeva and Queen Bhadaccana, both of whom came to Lanka and became its rulers in strange and curious circumstances. Panduvasadeva is the island's second recorded king, and the nephew of Vijaya, founder of the Lion Race in this isle.

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When Vijaya knew that his end was imminent and realising he had no son to succeed him, he took counsel with his ministers and sent word to his brother Sumitta in India, requesting him to come to Lanka and take over the sovereignty after his death. Sumitta, who had taken his father's place as ruler of Sihapura, after Sinhabahu's death, was also an old man. When he received his brother's request he was too feeble to comply with it. But he had three splendid sons.

"I am old, dear ones," he told them, "one of you must depart for the greatly favoured and beauteous isle of Lanka belonging to my brother, and there, after his death, assume the sovereignty of that fair kingdom."

Panduvāsadeva, the youngest, a bold and enterprising prince, decided to go for this momentous task. The palace soothsayers predicted the success of his venture and with his father's permission and blessing he set out, taking with him thirty-two others, sons of the king's ministers, all of them disguised as mendicant monks.

They reached the northern shore of Lanka and were well received by the people. Tradition has it that they landed at the present port of Trincomalee or in its vicinity ; a spot which the ancients called Gokanna. They found their way to Upatissagama, the then

capital city, where their arrival was expected. The soothsayers had predicted that on a particular auspicious day, the prince and his retinue would arrive.

For one year after King Vijaya's death, the government of the land had been conducted by the ministers, but now Panduvasadeva unanimously received their approval and acclaim as their king-elect. He was entrusted with the sovereignty, though his solemn consecration was deferred until a suitable consort had been found.

Meanwhile under different, but equally unusual circumstances, Citta's mother, Bhadaccana, set out from her own homeland. The youngest daughter of King Sakka Pandu, whose kingdom was "on the further side of the Ganges . . . ;" of exceptional beauty " . . . even as a woman made of gold, fair of form . . . , " Bhadaccana had been eagerly wooed by seven kings. Her father knowing that all seven young men could not be pleased, greatly feared their displeasure and the peril that would result from their rejection. Believing the palace soothsayers, who foretold that going on a distant journey, the princess would be royally consecrated in another land, the king regretfully decided to send his daughter away.

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“ . . . he placed his daughter speedily upon a ship, together with thirty-two women-friends, and launched the ship upon the Ganges saying : ‘ Whoever can, let him take my daughter.’ And they could not overtake her, but the ship fared swiftly from there.”

The vessel drifted to the northern coast of Lanka and disembarking, the princess and her attendants robed as nuns, inquired their way to Upatissagama, to which city they were courteously conducted.

Very soon after their arrival they were recognised as royal personages, and forthwith brought to the king. He was captivated by the beautiful princess at first sight of her. With the approval of his ministers the marriage of Panduvasadeva and Bhadaccana was solemnised with great ceremony and rejoicing. The king was then formally consecrated as Lanka’s monarch, and he in turn consecrated his spouse as queen.

Theirs was a happy life, the queen bearing ten noble sons, till their youngest and only daughter, Citta, was born. At her birth an ominous prophecy was made by brahmin soothsayers :

“ For the sake of the sovereignty will her son slay his uncles,” they warned her bewildered and terrified parents. It was this prophecy that evolved the strange pattern

of Citta's life and shaped it to the destiny that was hers, and her son's.

On hearing the fearful words of their ultimate doom, the king's sons resolved to kill the newborn princess without delay, but Prince Abhaya the eldest restrained them, through pity for the helpless babe.

They decided instead, to lodge her in a high tower, "... a chamber having but one pillar and the entry thereto made through the king's sleeping chamber." Serving women were placed within to care for the child, and the tower itself was heavily guarded by soldiers and servants. Confined in this way the royal family felt certain she would never be able to see or meet any strangers.

Through the heavy curtain of romantic legend that veils the story of Princess Citta, it is yet possible to glean that hers was a character of remarkable strength of purpose ; that she came to possess with the passing of the years, a singular shrewdness ; a determination to overcome her limiting circumstances and achieve the fulfilment predicted for her.

Citta, like millions of women down the ages, naturally saw great potential and promise in the significant words of the brahmans. No doubt because of this she always acted with great foresight, to preserve herself from

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harm and to safeguard her son. For indeed she did bring forth a son, in spite of the strict surveillance maintained by her anxious family and the careful precautions taken by them to prevent such an occurrence. It was a clear instance of Fate taking a hand over and above all human circumspection.

Citta passed the days—how we can only imagine—of her childhood and early adolescence, a prisoner in the high tower-room. She was not permitted the slightest degree of freedom or the normal, healthy intercourse with friends of her own age. But with the passing of the years she grew up to be ravishingly beautiful. Hers was a beauty that drove men mad at the mere sight of her exquisite face and delicate, graceful form. The prefix “ummada” (from ‘umadeti’: makes mad) was added to her name. And the guards were placed more strongly round her solitary chamber.

But it is easier to stay the course of the Mahaveli in full, raging flood-tide, than prevent destiny weaving its mysterious patterns with the lives of mortals chosen for its ultimate purpose.

In the years before Citta's birth, Bhadacanna's brothers had arrived in Lanka, where they were hospitably received by their brother-in-law at his Court. These princes obtained

the king's permission to take up their abode in whichever parts of Lanka they preferred. They settled down in the island, building towns and villages and cultivating the land.

One of Citta's maternal uncles, Dighayu by name, ruled in the southern districts. Dighayu had a brave and gallant son called Dighagamani. The strange story of his beautiful cousin locked away in a high, grey tower because her brothers feared a prophecy made at her birth, held a deep fascination for him. He never tired hearing of it. As he grew to manhood a wild desire possessed him to go to her, rescue her and make her his wife.

"He went, driven by longing for her, to Upatissagama, and there sought out the ruler of the land."

As a member of the royal family, nephew of the queen, Dighagamani was appointed to service at the Court. Soon he contrived to see the princess.

"Citta saw Gamani in the place where he stood opposite her window and her heart afire with love, she asked her serving-woman : 'Who is that ?'" For her it was love at first sight.

With the connivance of her faithful attendants the prince was admitted to her chamber,

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where the lovers spent many delightful, romantic hours together.

Soon Citta was with child.

“ . . . when the fruit of her womb was ripe the serving-woman told her mother and the mother, having questioned her daughter, told the king. The king took counsel with his sons and said : ‘ He too must be received among us ; let us give her in marriage to him.’ ”

Citta must indeed have been an exasperating problem to her distraught family. Though a marriage between the princess and her reckless lover was arranged, Citta’s brothers planned to slay her child, if it happened to be a son. The nephew they so greatly dreaded. The faithful attendants who assisted in her intrigue and allowed Dighagamani to enter her chamber were forthwith slain, much to the princess’ sorrow.

Pawn and victim of cruel circumstance since birth and during her helpless childhood, Citta had no illusions of the evils and dangers threatening her. At no time did she construe her brothers’ designs as anything but bloody and ruthless conspiracies against her, and at this point in her life she displays a bold and practical resourcefulness astonishing in a girl of her tender years. She made use of every material means to protect herself and her

son, including necessary lies, bribery and unscrupulous deception, for she was determined to see her son attain the royal dignity predicted for him.

As the time drew near for her child to be born, she sent out a loyal attendant to seek another woman who was also expecting a child at the same time. Such a woman, one who could be trusted, was fortuitiously discovered, stealthily brought and secretly installed in the palace. It so happened that this woman bore a daughter and Citta brought forth a son.

“Citta caused a thousand pieces of money to be handed over to the other, together with her son, and the latter’s daughter to be then brought and laid beside her. When the king’s sons heard a daughter had been born, they were well pleased, but the two, mother and grandmother, joining the names of grandfather and eldest uncle, gave the boy the name Pandukabhaya.”

Citta had surmounted the first great hurdle. Her son had been born but he was safe; miles from danger. The strong-willed, cool, calculating woman succeeded in out-witting her father the king and ten older brothers, all princes of the realm, and whisking away her son to safety under their very noses !

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Assisting her in this great intrigue was none other than the queen. Regardless of the prophecies of soothsayers, mother and daughter became close allies in a common cause, protecting their offspring from annihilation.

Dramatic stories are recorded in the Mahavamsa of Prince Pandukabhaya's brushes with death during the ensuing years. When he was seven his mother's trick was discovered, and his uncles, aware that the boy lived hidden away from his enemies at Court, were determined to put him to death.

On one occasion after having discovered his whereabouts, they charged their followers to kill the boys playing in a certain pond, because Pandukabhaya was known to be one of their number. When the murderers arrived to commit their dastardly crime, the suspicious boy dived fully clothed into the water, and hid himself in the hollow of a tree which grew from within the pond.

"When the men had counted the clothes and killed the other boys they went away and declared: "The boys have all been killed!" When they were gone the boy went to his foster-father's house and comforted by him, he lived on there to the age of twelve years."

Later another attempt was made on Pandu-kabhaya's life. The princes, knowing that the boy's foster-father was a herdsman, ordered their followers to kill all the herdsmen in those parts. It so happened that on that day the herdsmen had killed a deer which they decided to roast in the field. Pandu-kabhaya was sent back to the village to bring fire. The boy, tired-out, sent his foster-father's own son back with the fire while he himself rested at home.

"At that moment those men despatched to do it (the murder) surrounded the herdsmen and killed them all, and when they had killed them they went and told the boy's uncles."

It is remarkable that none of the princes could prevail upon their sister to divulge the whereabouts of her son. They were not afraid of her, though they feared the disastrous misfortunes that might overtake them through her son, but they had no means of forcing her will.

During the boy's enforced exile she remained in constant touch with his foster parents and many a time she would have yearned to be in the company of her beloved son. Often she lived in anxious dread that he would come to some harm for she knew his life was in constant danger. What anguish

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she underwent on his behalf, how acutely she suffered when she heard of the attempts made on his life, and his hairsbreadth escapes. But Citta persevered. With infinite patience and rare courage she bided her time ; meanwhile taking whatever steps she could to see that her son acquired the princely graces and an education fitting and necessary for his royal heritage.

When he was sixteen she arranged for him to be brought to the house of Brahman Pandula, one of the most learned pandits of the age “ . . . a rich man learned in the Vedas.”

The Brahman, on seeing the prince “ . . . paid him honour and said : ‘Thou wilt be king and full seventy years will thou rule ; learn the art, my dear !’ and he instructed him . . . ” How his mother’s heart would have warmed to their mutual destiny, had she heard those encouraging words.

After many vicissitudes, battles and bloody campaigns, Pandukabhaya achieved the destiny foretold for him. He overcame his enemies after long arduous years to be king of Lanka, choosing to reign in Anuradhapura, the settlement founded by his great-uncle Anuradha.

His own hard and hunted early life had taught him the virtues of compassion and

gratitude. He did not slay his eldest uncle Abhaya, who at all times had befriended and been fond of his mother and himself. Instead he "handed over the government to him for the night-time," designating him "Nagara-guttika" or Guardian of the City.

Neither did he put to death his uncle Girikandasiva, whose daughter, the virtuous Suvannapali, he had married and consecrated as his queen. To Girikandasiva he assigned the district known as Girikanda to be ruled over by that prince during his life-time.

His mother, the woman who from birth had lived in close and unnatural seclusion ; guarded and spied upon ; the focus of intrigue and suspicion ; mistrusted by her own kin, was at last free to take her rightful place in the kingdom as Queen Dowager. By his own indomitable will ; his brilliant prowess in battle ; his incredible fearlessness and his daring and ambition, Pandukabhaya had won the "parasol of sovereignty" over Lanka, and all those were characteristics and qualities inherited from his mother, Princess Citta, who at the lowest ebb-tide of her fortunes yet refused to despair ; disdained intimidation by force or threat of violence and continued to maintain her implicit belief in her own and her son's bright destiny.

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It is pleasant to think that the beautiful Ummadacitta, after the long, anxious years of struggle, at the prime of her chequered but "charmed" life, deserved her due reward in the final triumph of her remarkable son.

SOMADEVI

IT WAS HOT and uncomfortable inside the closed chariot. The driver did not spare the horses. He whipped them into a frenzied pace. The occupants swayed from side to side with the violent motion of the vehicle, trying as best they could to cling to their seats.

Fear and anxiety were written on their faces. A tightlipped silence reigned in the sticky interior of the carriage, except when the big, stout man sitting nearest the closed flap of the window behind the driver, spoke to urge a speedier progress.

In one corner, huddled in her precarious seat in a sweating agony of terror, a woman gasped and whimpered in pain. Her hands were tightly clasped over her swollen belly. It was obvious she was pregnant, fast approaching her time. Two young boys, their fine clothes crumpled and bedraggled, sat hunched in their seats, eyes staring without expression at the blank carriage wall in front of them. In the other corner a young woman, her pale, beautiful face set in sharp, resolute lines, suddenly leaned forward and gently touched the arm of the man who was growling curses at the driver's clumsiness.

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Somadevi, wife of Vattagamani Abhaya (Valagambahu), king of Ceylon, had made up her mind. It was a crucial moment. Perhaps the most dramatic event of her life. So many unfortunate and disastrous events had led up to it.

After the great Duttugemunu's death, his brother Tissa, known in the Chronicle as Saddha Tissa because of his extraordinary piety and dedication to the faith, ruled for eighteen years. Duttugemunu's own son, Prince Saliya, had renounced his royal heritage to wed a Chandala maiden, the fair Asokamala by whom he was captivated.

Saddhatissa had many sons who reigned after him, but strife and dissension arose in the kingdom as the brothers challenged each other's right to the succession. Numerous factions, each vehemently opposed to the other, their allegiance drawn to one brother or another, grew and became powerful with the years. And the kingdom was torn with rivalry between kith and kin.

During the reign of Khallata Naga (circa 109 B.C.) a military commander, Maharrattaka, taking advantage of the intrigues and jealousies within the royal family, succeeded in overpowering and destroying the king in Anuradhapura by staging a bold coup d'état. But Vattagamani, the youngest and most

redoubtable of Saddhatissa's sons, was able by a swift and successful counter coup, to take over the sovereignty for himself.

Vattagamani Abhaya however, was not allowed to reign over his newly-won kingdom in peace for very long. There were many enemies who sought his downfall. There was also the danger of an imminent Tamil invasion from the North. It so happened that almost simultaneously a young Brahmin named Tissa rose in rebellion against the king in Ruhuna and a Tamil army led by seven chieftains landed at Mahatittha. Tissa who had a large rebel following at first, combined with the invaders, their united aim being to depose Vattagamani.

"Then Tissa the brahman and the seven Damilas also sent the king a written message concerning the handing over of the parasol." The symbol of sovereignty in ancient Lanka.

Vattagamani now displayed a sagacity worthy of his great forebear, the doughty hero Duttugemunu. He in turn "... sent a written message to Tissa the brahman : 'The kingdom is now thine, conquer thou the Damilas.'" Tissa was taken in by the king's ruse. He fought against the Tamils and was utterly vanquished by them. But the victorious invading forces advanced further towards Anuradhapura intent on

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capturing the monarch. Vattagamani Abhaya prepared his army to do battle with them, although perhaps he already knew his chance of success was slim.

Accompanied by his queens, Anuladevi and Somadevi ; his nephew Mahaculika and his own son Mahanaga, Vattagamani rode out to battle. Mounted on a carriage stationed near the Tittharama, a monastery built many centuries earlier by Pandukabhaya for the Jaina community of ascetics, the royal party watched the raging battle at Kolambahalaka, outside the northern gate of the city of Anuradhapura.

Soon it was evident that the king's troops were faring badly. Within a few brief hours the Sinhala army suffered a decisive defeat. Such an event had however been planned for by the king and his few faithful retainers. Once the outcome of the battle was obvious, Vattagamani Abhaya leaped into the waiting carriage and fled from the field of battle.

An ascetic named Giri watched the monarch's hasty flight from the entrance to the Tittharama. Seeking to humiliate the king he cried out loudly and derisively :
“ The great black lion is fleeing ! ”

The king heard. And the thought of revenge at some later date on his taunter overcame his humiliation at the words. He

vowed to destroy the monastery and the jeering ascetic as well when he had regained his throne, saying to himself : " If my wish be fulfilled I will build a vihara here."

So now they were on their way. Broken, defeated, filled with fear and an uncertain future, fleeing to the safety of the hills and rock caves of Malaya rata. It was barely an hour since his ignominious overthrow by the Tamils. The king brooded on the danger of their plight and grumbled constantly that the carriage was not moving as fast as he wished . . . till Somadevi made her dramatic, self-sacrificing offer.

Not that it had been an easy or simple decision for a young woman, a princess who had never known the stress and turbulence of the world, to make. But Somadevi's was a spirit of courage and endurance surpassed by a few. Carefully she had weighed the considerations and had reached the conclusion that of the five occupants in the carriage, she could best be spared.

Fugitive though he was, her husband was king and if he could but make good his escape at this moment of crisis, she was convinced he would return to defeat his enemies. The two lads, timid and terrified, were both princes of the realm, Mahaculi her husband's nephew and Mahanaga his

own young son. They had a noble future ahead of them and their lives were exceeding precious. Anuladevi, the king's brother's wife was pregnant. Her husband, Khallata Naga, had died but five months ago and Vattagamani had made her also his own queen, swearing to protect her and her son.

But the carriage was overloaded. The driver, irked no doubt by his sovereign's impatience and the foul curses being hurled at him for what was by no means his own ineptitude or lack of skill, or his horses' sluggishness, flatly announced that he dared not drive any faster. Plainly he told the king the weight of the carriage was too great. It would be sheer folly to whip the sweating animals to race yet more speedily. As it was, he insisted, the horses were doing their best, as he did. Disaster alone would overtake the royal party if he drove any faster.

Somadevi silently listened to the driver's complaints. Her mind grasped that the man was not merely making excuses. His loyalty to her husband and their cause could not be questioned. So quietly, unemotionally, she asked the king to allow her to descend from the carriage. To grant her permission to return to the city. What was her life worth compared to his own ?

Vattagamani Abhaya was torn with indecision. At first the conflict in his mind seemed too great to be borne. How could he possibly allow this noble and beautiful woman, his favourite queen, to risk her life for them? He recalled that his recent marriage to Anuladevi had been one of expedience. At all costs her son, his dead brother's child, had to be protected. In marrying the child's mother, he had dutifully carried out a custom of his times. But with a rush of tenderness he remembered his marriage to Somadevi had been different. He had cared deeply for this fair and charming princess. He had never imagined she carried such a bold, stout, generous heart within her beautiful body.

For a moment he refused to accept, refused even to consider her suggestion. They would continue on their way, taking her along with them and hope for the best. But again he hesitated. After all, was he not, first and foremost Lanka's king, heir of a heroic line of monarchs? No doubt at this moment he had no kingdom, but there was nothing to prevent him from gathering an army in the south where the people were always loyal to his family. There was no reason for him to fail a second time. Suddenly he was elated. He had an uncanny premonition

he would survive to win back his kingdom, if he but accepted his queen's extraordinarily magnanimous offer.

Delay and hesitation at this vital juncture could be fatal. Could mean certain death. Even now his enemies might be close upon their trail. What a prize would the capture of the royal occupants of this carriage be for them !

He also understood that to proceed at the pace they were moving or to make a swifter pace in the already creaking and rattling carriage would be disastrous. The vehicle might fall apart, be flung off the road. The king well knew he hardly had a choice, now that Somadevi had spoken. With great sorrow and reluctance Vattagamani gave the order for the carriage to halt.

But what could he give her in return for her generosity ? All his wealth, his rich and splendid jewels, the regalia of his kingdom remained in the palace. Bitterly he reflected that his enemies would ruthlessly sack and plunder his royal treasure house, taking for themselves all his most cherished possessions. In sorrow and anger he realised he had nothing to give her as a token of his love and gratitude. And then it struck him that his crown yet lay upon his head ; the diadem of gold he had donned before the battle.

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He would give it to her. Possession of it may possibly bring her harm, but the chances were greater that it might help her. There were perhaps some in the city, loyal to their defeated king who would regard his well-beloved queen with respect and deference, once they saw she possessed a symbol of his royal authority.

“To lighten the car the king gave Somadevi his splendid diadem jewel and let her with her consent, descend from the car.”

The others were astonished and filled with feelings mixed with both horror and admiration. Anuladevi cried out in pain and sorrow that her sister-in-law was insane. The small boys sobbed inconsolably though they scarcely understood the drama taking place within the closed walls of the carriage.

But there was no time to linger. No time for fond farewells. No time for tears. Somadevi stepped nimbly out of the chariot. For a moment she stood on the deserted road, the afternoon sun beating down on her. Smiling bravely at her husband and his weeping family, she watched as the driver once again took up the reins and whipped the horses into motion. The carriage took off in a cloud of red dust that enveloped her. Soon it was lost to sight round a bend in

the road. And resolutely she turned her face to the city.

Somadevi had no illusions of her subsequent fate. She knew that Anuradhapura would be one raging, seething, brawling mass of people. Its citizens supped full with the horrors of war brought to their very city gates. Marauders and murderers would be abroad, terrorising the populace, wreaking their cruelties on friend and foe alike; looting, robbing, burning and brutally massacring all and sundry who stood in their path of destruction.

She did not hope to save her life. She did not wish to. In the first intoxicating moments of her self-sacrificing decision, she had not thought beyond the immediate future. But now with heavy heart she guessed what fate might overtake her, and she longed for death, praying that it come to her swiftly, without undue pain and humiliation. She could not ask for more.

Hiding the golden diadem in the soft folds of her garments, Somadevi directed her steps to the city she had fled from only a short while before. Her relatives lived in the vicinity of the palace. She would go to them, and seek their succour. If they were still alive.

The conquerers had entrenched themselves in power. Soon they learned that the wife

of Vattagamani Abhaya had returned to Anuradhapura ; that she lived in hiding with relatives who harboured her. One of the invading chieftains, who perhaps had heard of her great beauty, and been intrigued by the heroic story of her sacrifice, sought her out.

“Of the seven Damilas, one fired with passion for the lovely Somadevi, made her his own and forthwith returned again to the further coast.”

Somadevi herself may well have preferred death to becoming the unhappy wife of a hated enemy. How much she disliked the idea of going with him to his own country, stranger in an alien land. But courage was her supreme virtue, and indeed what choice had she ? The Tamil chieftain desired to make her his spouse. She was forced to submit. In any event had she not been prepared to accept whatever evil came to her, when she made that fateful decision in the carriage on that memorable day ?

The ancient Chronicler makes no mention of the queen during her enforced exile in India which lasted more than fourteen years. We can only surmise how she lived those long years, keeping green the memory of her royal husband all the time, hunted fugitive though he was in the jungles of Ruhuna, so

many hundreds of miles away from her own abode.

But Vattagamani himself, though dogged by setbacks and misfortunes did not once falter in his ambition to recover his kingdom. For fourteen years he dwelt in the house of a local chieftain, Tanasiva, to whom he had been led by a friend and benefactor, Mahatissa Thera. Tanasiva alone, among the people of that district, was aware of the identity of the king. When on one occasion, a quarrel ensued between Anuladevi and the chieftain's wife, Vattagamani was forced to slay Tanasiva, who threatened harm to the queen. The chief's followers were determined to avenge their leader, whereupon the king was able to save himself only by revealing to them his royal identity.

"The king proclaimed then his name and gathered followers around him. He obtained as ministers eight famous warriors and great was the following of the king and his equipment for war."

In all these years there is no record of any contact between Vattagamani and his lost queen. Fifteen years was time enough, one would think, for a man and woman to forget each other and the tragedy that had caused their separation ; to become reconciled to their sad fate. But Vattagamani and

Somadevi were neither fickle nor inconstant. Perhaps travellers from both countries brought news of one to the other, for Vattagamani was aware that she dwelt in Jambudipa in India.

While he lived in Ruhuna planning a means of overthrowing his enemies and winning back his kingdom, he did not forget the woman whose incredible generosity had saved his life. Somadevi too, bided her time in India. A steadfast nature as hers surely had cultivated the art of patience.

When at last Vattagamani Abhaya was certain his army was strong enough to face the foe, and that he had the support of the Sangha as well as the greater majority of the people, he began his triumphant march to Rajarata.

At last he reached the outskirts of the city. The Tamil usurper Prince Dathika had already received news of Vattagamani's return from the south. He was aware that the king had gathered adherents all along the way and was accompanied by generals whose valour and courage and derring-do in battle had already become legendary. Dathika himself could not call upon sufficiently trustworthy allies, or a large and powerful army, torn as were the Tamil chieftains by bitter personal rivalries. It was this jealousy among them that destroyed their power so brutally

appropriated. But Dathika was a brave man and would not flee from his fate. He decided to fight to the finish and make a desperate bid to retain his position against all odds.

Almost at the same spot where Vattagamani had suffered his crushing defeat a decade and a half ago, the two armies clashed in fierce combat. At the last critical juncture the Tamil chieftains had united under Dathika's command, determined to fight to retain their usurped power, urging their army of mercenaries to wild feats of arms. But it was a losing battle. They were out-matched and overwhelmingly outnumbered by the king's troops who fought not simply for their lives, but for their country so long occupied and exploited by the hated invader. Prominent in their midst was their king ; the big, burly, royal figure on his mighty war-elephant, his great sword striking pitilessly at his opponents, heroically leading his army on to an assured victory.

Dathika knew he was beaten; that he was surrounded by his enemies crying out madly for his blood and the blood of his rapacious followers. But he would deal one last and fatal blow before he succumbed to his fate. There he was, the man he desired to kill : the quarry directly in view, incredibly close at hand. Unmistakably the king, a gold

diadem firm on his brow. Was he so sure then of victory that he had come thus arrayed to battle ? Had he not reckoned with a man who had lost all hope and all desire to live ? With a vicious snarl of hatred, Dathika raised himself high in his saddle and lifted his great, gleaming blade. Was it the air it had run through: the sword that never before had failed him ? For a blinding instant he gazed into the glowing eyes of the man he had sought to destroy and saw murder malevolently in their depths. So straight and sure was the brawny arm that Dathika did not feel the sharp point of steel enter his breast. He slumped low in his saddle even before the red blood gushed forth in a torrent. He did not know that his enemy's horsehoofs crushed him into the soil of the land he had so cruelly violated. He did not see the pitiful remains of his army scattered in the wind, fleeing in terror from the carnage, only to be pursued and mercilessly slaughtered.

Vattagamani drew aside from the scene of havoc and destruction. His heart was jubilant as he surveyed his brilliant victory. He watched as his generals rode up to him in ordered file and bowing low before him renewed their submission to their king. Formidable men, wholeheartedly loyal ; he would

soon reward them a hundredfold for their allegiance and dedication to his cause. It was over: the shame and degradation he had endured ; his life as a hunted fugitive ; the pain and anxiety and suffering that had been his for fifteen years.

“When the renowned king had come to Anuradhapura and had slain the Damila Dathika, he himself assumed the government.”

True to the promise he had made himself more than fourteen years before, and fulfilling the implicit confidence Somadevi his queen had reposed in him, Vattagamani Abhaya assumed the sovereignty of Lanka once more.

He did not forget those who had helped him in his years of travail. Neither did he fail to fulfil the vow he had made to destroy the mocking Jaina, Giri, and his monastery, the Tittharama.

“Forthwith the king destroyed the arama of the niganthas and built there a vihara with twelve cells . . . the king filled with pious zeal built the Abhayagiri vihara. He sent for the theras who had assisted him and to the thera Mahatissa he gave the vihara to do him honour. Since the King Abhaya built it on the place of the arama of the nigantha Giri, the vihara received the name Abhayagiri.”

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With all due haste he sent for Somadevi his queen. Her abductor would have feared the vengeance of the king of Lanka, and dared not defy the order. Or perhaps the Tamil chieftain was already dead by the time the royal envoy from Lanka reached the queen in exile, to ceremoniously escort her back to her homeland.

Whatever the circumstances of her life at that time, the faithful Somadevi immediately answered the summons of her lord. She returned jubilantly to Lanka. The reunion between husband and wife was a joyful and poignant one. How much they had to say to each other ; of all that had been done and left undone in the long, unhappy years of separation. But they were blissfully content simply to be with each other once more, and find comfort and satisfaction in each other's presence. It was happiness enough that they who loved each other with so deep and binding a love, were together again ; king and queen over the land they loved with a fiercely protective passion.

Vattagamani in his boundless joy was eager to build a monument in her honour to commemorate her great act of sacrifice. Somadevi then told her royal husband of an incident she had kept hidden in her heart through the long, bleak years of parting.

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It seemed that on dismounting from the carriage on that long-distant, calamituous day, she had hidden herself in a thicket of flowering kadambas before retracing her steps to the city. In that place she had seen a holy ascetic relieving his need "... using decently his hand for concealment." Unknown to the saintly samenera she had quietly stolen away. When the king heard her story he had the Somarama built at that very spot.

Archaeologists identify the beautiful ruin popularly known as the "Queen's Pavilion" with the splendid vihara Vattagamani Abhaya built as a tribute to his queen.

Many notable events took place in the later years of their reign. The first schism in the Buddhist church dates from the time of this king. As the Chronicle describes it :

"A therā known by the name of Mahātissa, who had frequented the families of laymen, was expelled by the brotherhood from our monastery (Mahavihara) for this fault, the frequenting of lay families. His disciples the therā who was known as Bahalamassutissa went in anger to the Abhayagiri (vihara) and abode there, forming a separate faction. And thenceforward these bhikkhus came no more to the Mahavihara : thus did the bhikkhus of the Abhayagiri secede from the Theravada. From the monks

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of the Abhayagiri those of the Dakkhinavihara separated (afterwards) ; in this wise those bhikkhus (who had seceded) from the adherents of the Theravada were divided into two groups."

Another event of importance was the writing of the books of the Tipitaka, which up to that time had been orally transmitted. "The text of the three pitaka and the atthakatha thereon did the most wise bhikkhus hand down in former times orally, but since they saw that the people were falling away (from the religion) the bhikkhus came together, and in order that the true doctrine might endure, they wrote them down in books."

Vattagamani, full of zeal to renew the religious convictions of his people, called together a great convention of the Sangha from all parts of the island. They met together in the royal capital, presided over by the king himself, making many useful and practical suggestions to the prelates. Among the momentous resolutions reached at this convention was the decision to write down from the dictation of learned scholar-monks, the doctrines and precepts of Buddhism, thus ensuring their survival for posterity. Tradition has it that this significant and sacred work was undertaken in

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the precincts of the Alu Vihara in Matale ; one of those rock caves which had provided shelter to the fugitive king in his days of exile, and which he had later converted into a splendid temple.

Vattagamani and his queen also built many magnificent dagobas and viharas in the city, seeking even to outdo the work of their renowned predecessors. Awesome and impressive stupas were constructed during this time “. . . structures whose stupendous dimensions . . . are hardly outdone even in the instance of the Pyramids of Egypt.” (Emerson Tennent). The age of Vattagamani Abhaya and Somadevi his heroic queen was yet the Golden Age in Lanka's history.

Twelve years passed. Twelve fulfilled and incredibly happy years for Somadevi and her royal consort. Only one sorrow tugged at her heart. She who loved her lord so profoundly had not borne him a son. She who was so beautiful ; so graceful of form and feature ; so full of zest and vitality was yet barren. There were times her heart ached with disappointment and regret. But never for an instant did the king's love and devotion towards her falter ; never had it failed her in all their time together. She had not borne new life in her womb ; she had not given him offspring, but had she not once

offered her own life to save his and had he not accepted her wondrous gift ? Was he such a monster that he could ever forget the noble, spontaneous, self-sacrificing act she had performed, or ever cease to be grateful to her ? Had they not both shared the pangs of loss and tribulation and experienced long, slow-moving years of deepest anguish ? What was there to regret but those lost, lonely years ? And knowing he spoke truly Somadevi's sorrow was eased ; her fears lulled. Other women bore him his sons and heirs, but she possessed for all time the inestimable treasure of his love. No other woman, though his harem was filled with fair and witty and intelligent princesses, could ever take her place in his life and both of them were aware of it.

Vattagamani did not long outlive his beloved queen. With her death the rich mosaic of his life lost its brilliance ; he was sudden-old and worn-out and weary. And none could take her place, for Somadevi his wife was remarkable and unique among women-kind.

POTTHA

MOST OF THE Mahavamsa portraits of women are drawn in miniature as it were, but it is remarkable what a striking picture is conveyed in every instance. All we have to do to make these characters come alive for us, is to use what has been described as the glass of imagination. By our own knowledge and understanding of our fellow creatures, we are able to breathe life into these characters who lived and loved and hated ; knew joy and adversity, disaster and triumph so many centuries ago.

Only a few short sentences deal with the significant career of Pottha, but we discover that she was one of the most interesting women of the Mahavamsa. A delightful mixture of charm and guile and sheer good sense. Pottha strikes us as being a woman with a mind of her own, but unlike most of her sex, she was particular to use her wits with care and foresight.

The chief action of her life was to alter the course of history ; a sufficiently impressive achievement for any one human being, but nowhere do we receive the impression that she herself was obsessed with a ponderous sense of history. Pottha simply and undramatically did what seemed to her necessary at

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a particular time, and she was convinced the measures she took were both right and wise.

Here is an excellent instance when posterity might be prompted to debate : What if this clear-sighted and courageous woman chose to remain passive, to let matters take their course ? While there are those who believe implicitly in the inevitability of fate, others may well decide that if not for Pottha, Ceylon history from a certain point onwards, might have read differently.

A princess of the powerful, ambitious Lambakanna clan, who a few decades earlier had sought to seize the sovereignty, Pottha was the wife of the senapati (commander-in-chief of the Army). This nobleman was one of those rare individuals who was loyal and faithful to the master he served irrespective of whether this master was deserving of such devotion. To men such as Pottha's husband it is the very symbol of kingship and authority that matters; not the human figure who represents it. Otherwise it is difficult to understand why the man continued to remain loyal, in spite of severe odds, to a king who had made a travesty of his sovereignty ; who had obtained his high position and won the throne of Lanka by cruelly taking advantage of a jest.

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King Subha may have been an imposter, a man of low birth ; but to the senapati he was sovereign. He served his ruler to the bitter end and died gloriously. His ideals untarnished.

Simple, uncomplicated creature though he seemed to be, the husband of Pottha will always remain a character for conjecture. While it is obvious he was blindly loyal, even inclined to be fanatical in carrying out royal orders to the letter, there is a suspicion of other, more subtle, political reasons for his decision to deliver up his own nephew as a victim of the usurper-king's superstitious fears.

Subha-rajā, king of Lanka through his own quick, wily wits, was filled with foreboding when a palace soothsayer warned him that he would be deprived of both his kingship and his life by one who bore the name of Vasabha. Subha remembered that the king he had deposed, Yasalakatissa, had also made a similar prophecy. Panic-stricken, because his position was precarious at the best of times, the monarch decided to put to death all men in his kingdom who bore that dreaded name. It so happened that the senapati's own nephew, who served in the Army under him, was called Vasabha.

Vasabha, a handsome and comely young prince of the influential Lambakanna clan, being in such close contact with palace circles, had doubtless heard rumours of these prophecies. We can only guess whether any aspirations of kingship had not already stirred in his bold young breast. He was aware that Subharaja had destroyed the last scion of the old, royal, Vijayan dynasty; that Subha himself was unpopular with the majority and without a male heir. He could see the succession was open to any audacious, enterprising adventurer who sought to challenge the king.

Vasabha's uncle may have discerned the direction in which his nephew's aspirations were inclined. Though the ancient Chronicler conveys no impression that the senapati was particularly sensitive to the atmosphere around him, it is more than likely that in his zeal and ardour of service to the monarch, he desired to carry out the stern orders given him.

So he mused in the privacy of his bed-chamber, where he believed it was safe to think aloud: "We must deliver up our Vasabha to the king." Personal relationships and natural affections for those of his own blood did not apparently deter the good man in carrying out his duty. If he was totally

without imagination he would not have suffered unduly of remorse, or have been tormented with reproaches of conscience at the thought he contemplated.

But the senapati had not reckoned with his wife. It is doubtful whether her staid husband was ever aware of the true nature of his quiet, dutiful wife. For if he had the slightest misgivings of her integrity, there is no likelihood that he would have announced his course of action in her presence. Here for the first time we meet with the astuteness, the sharp sagaciousness of the woman. Coolly and cleverly she hid her instant alarm on hearing his words and disguised her feelings of horror and disgust. So much so, that the senapati naively "took counsel" with her and fell asleep lulled into believing her whole-hearted acquiescence with his plans.

Actually Pottha was not burdened with the same dedication to duty that inspired her husband. She was no idealist like him and immediately decided it was up to her—and her alone—to prepare a sound counter plan of action. She even considered it her obligation to frustrate her husband's remorseless resolve and save the nephew he wished to deliver to the king's perverted whim.

Being a cautious and prudent woman however, she ostensibly agreed with him.

Instinctively she understood the great danger for Vasabha and herself in opposing the commander. He had confided in his wife, but he had not even vaguely considered the possibility that she might disagree, yet alone betray him ! Knowing her husband's intrinsic character to an amazing degree, Pottha did not waste time or endanger her position by either arguing or remonstrating with her spouse.

So while he slept soundly with a clear conscience, she lay awake. Her keen, alert mind grappling with the problem that confronted her. How could she make her husband's nephew cognizant of his imminent peril ? How could she secure his safety ? How arrange for him to flee swiftly and surely, miles away from the city of Anuradhapura, where danger stalked close beside him ?

She dared not speak openly and warn him of the impending peril even though he lived under their own roof. As his uncle's wife she had every right to do so, but how could she, when his own near-relative had decided to give him up to the king's mad vengeance ? She did not trust her own retainers. They might deliberately eavesdrop on her conversation, or accidentally overhear her words and take them to her lord. It was too great a risk anyway to speak with Vasabha in

the bustle of early morning, while her husband was present in the house. She would have to conceive some other means to convey her warning and arrange for his escape.

Frantically Princess Pottha explored every possibility that arose in her scheming mind. At last the solution that flashed upon her, astonished her by its very simplicity. She almost laughed aloud in satisfaction, but being Pottha, the careful, crafty one, she merely sighed with relief and closed her weary eyes in slumber.

She was up with the dawn, solicitous of her husband's needs, and the precise supervision of her vast household. Diligent and attentive as usual, she waited upon him as he prepared to set out on his visit to the palace accompanied by his nephew. At last they were ready to leave, and as she did everyday, after bidding farewell to her husband, she handed Vasabha the richly embroidered bag of betel for their day's chew.

Her heart was beating fast, her pulse racing, her colour a little higher than usual, but at the same time she was certain her husband would not notice such trifling details. Steeling herself to be calm and dignified, she settled down to her household duties, while waiting breathlessly for Vasabha's return. She was quite sure he would return,

for the senapati would not chew his betel without one of the vital ingredients. No man addicted to the habit relished betel without chunam. And she had laid out the contents of the bag of betel that morning deliberately omitting the chalk. She was confident the senapati would not stoop to borrowing chunam from any of his colleagues, or that he would exert himself walking back home to fetch it.

“Now when the commander, at the gate of the palace, saw the betel without chalk, he sent him (Vasabha) back for the chalk.”

How well and shrewdly Pottha had judged her husband. How wise she had been in not attempting more complicated methods to warn the prince. The most her husband would think, if he considered this lapse of hers at all, was that his conscientious wife had been rather forgetful that morning ; all too human and feminine a failing !

Here was Vasabha now, winded and short of breath, because his uncle had told him to make haste. This was the moment Pottha had waited for. Her servants were busy at their tasks ; there was no one near to see or listen to her as she spoke privately with the prince. Hurriedly she informed him of the dreadful fate that awaited him if he remained longer with his uncle.

“When Vasabha came for the chalk, the commander’s wife spoke with him secretly, gave him a thousand pieces of money and aided him to take flight.”

Not for a single moment did Vasabha doubt her word. This in itself indicates that he understood her far better than her stolid husband did. He knew that she was too careful and controlled a woman to take such mighty risks on his behalf unless she was certain in her own mind that they were necessary. It is also likely that he himself had already heard of the king’s intention to safeguard his royal position at any cost, but Vasabha would scarcely have imagined that his own uncle would betray him. Therefore he listened intently to Pottha’s advice.

She was eminently practical in her plans. In a very, down-to-earth, straightforward manner she furnished him with the means to make his escape possible. Pottha knew that without money for his immediate needs the young man could scarcely run away in haste. She had not only to warn him but also provide him with vital funds for his departure. So she gave him “a thousand kahapanas” which was a considerable sum, but which she could safely release from her private purse, leaving no room for her husband to become unduly suspicious if he

ever discovered the depleted state of her finances.

Pottha's swift and saving action on Vasabha's behalf may well have been due to the fact that she was in love with the gallant young prince. But love in no way reduced this woman to a state of disturbing, blundering confusion. She merely did what had to be done with the minimum of fuss and delay and without betraying the least hint of her own complicity in the plot.

Besides this was not the time for an exhibition of sickly sentiment. She harboured no sensational notions of flying with the prince. She knew it would be incommoding for him at this bleak nadir of his fortunes to be burdened with a love-lorn woman. She herself had no illusions that it would not be extremely irksome and uncomfortable for her. She who loved neatness and method and order in her life, with the placid evenness of her days and her exalted position as the senapati's honoured wife, could not live a fugitive in forest caves and the jungle wilderness, tramping miles over difficult terrain in long, forced marches through the uncharted hills of Malaya and Ruhuna, until a following was gathered and an army trained to deliver the kingdom from the low-born usurper.

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No, her duty was to use her wits and assist Vasabha to flee, but to do so in the most dignified manner. Then wait with patience and confidence till he achieved what they both desired. Her love for her husband's nephew was strong enough to sustain the pangs of parting ; steadfast enough to ensure his welfare and future success before demanding that her own illicit passion be satisfied.

Could it be possible that she also took this step because she wholeheartedly despised the usurper Subharaja ? Because she was secretly intolerant of her husband's blind loyalty to the one-time palace doorkeeper, who dared to wear the superb and mystic "ekavali ;" the precious pearl-string of sovereignty round his thick, ugly neck. She was a daughter of a haughty and noble clan, who themselves aspired to royalty, and who saw their ambitions near fulfilment now that no prince of the ancient royal lineage existed to claim the throne. But Pottha was no creature of impulse who would ruin her chances before they clearly manifested themselves.

The Chronicle does not convey the senapati's reactions on finding his nephew fled to safety. But having known many artful women like Pottha in our own times, we may well infer that her husband would not have

had the least suspicion of her complicity in Vasabha's escape !

Prince Vasabha reached Ruhuna and over a period of two years he gathered an army. He had the blessing and support of the Maha Sangha who were implacably opposed to King Subha, in spite of the latter's overtures to them and his efforts to placate them by building religious edifices in the royal city.

"And when he (Vasabha) had found men suited to his purpose, he went, seizing in his further course village by village . . . and gradually winning the kingdom to himself, he advanced after two years, with the needful army and train, towards the capital."

Pottha, the woman who had such an excellent control of her emotions, cleverly concealed her glad rejoicings at Vasabha's victorious advance. She continued to be a dutiful and loving wife to her husband, who still staunchly commanded the king's troops.

At the fierce battle which ensued both Subharaja and his faithful senapati lost their lives. Vasabha, triumphant, "raised the parasol of sovereignty in the capital." Soon after he married her, and consecrated the resourceful princess Pottha, "who had first helped him" as his queen. After all, these two in their own way, had also been loyal — to each other and to their innermost beliefs.

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The reign of Vasabha and Pottha, was distinguished by its stability and good government, and the peace and well-being it brought to the people of Lanka. Serenity and long life were the reward of those two who had once known and experienced the pangs of danger ; its anxieties and its dire perils.

Vasabha ruled for forty-four years, carrying out many religious and public projects for the benefit of his people. He restored ruined buildings and built new ones, including ten beautiful thupas, a vihara at Mahagama, a shrine-room in the courtyard of the Sri Maha Bodhi, twelve new tanks and irrigation canals, as well as a resplendent palace in the city. Queen Pottha ably assisted him in all these tasks, while she herself initiated the building of "a splendid thupa and a beautiful temple for the thupa."

The king and his consort regularly distributed lavish alms to the Brotherhood, had food given to the poor at the city gates and celebrated with all piety and splendour, forty-four Vesak festivals.

Pottha bore her lord two fine sons, and though not of royal birth, together the two of them established a new dynasty — the Lambakanna dynasty which ruled Lanka for three hundred and fifty years.

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IN AN AGE when kings practiced polygamy, queens were often forces to be reckoned with. Prospective heirs to the throne were sometimes in danger of the machinations of the monarch's lesser wives, who quite naturally, sought to promote the welfare of their own children. Jealousy and rivalry existed among the fair members of the royal household and the king's favourite was usually disliked by those she superseded. Life in the women's quarters of the court reeked with intrigue.

There are good queens and bad described in the old Chronicle. Many lived noble and virtuous lives, distinguished by their devotion to the religion, working for the welfare of their less-favoured sisters, doing works of charity for the poor and needy. They were shining examples to their subjects, much admired in their life-time and greatly honoured after their death.

Some on the other hand, were evil and treacherous, selfish and self-seeking; adulteresses and murderesses; indifferent to the dignity of their high position and heedless of the doctrine.

But few women in ancient Ceylon incurred such universal detestation in the popular mind, and such a high degree of

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censure as the infamous Queen Anula. None certainly were written of with so much loathing by the Chronicler. Up to our own time the memory of Anula is synonymous with wickedness.

The portrait of her that has come down to us is not an attractive one. She must have been a beautiful woman in a strikingly vibrant fashion, possessed of a vivid sex appeal, but bold and headstrong by nature. As a queen she had every opportunity to satisfy her most extravagant and lascivious desires to their utmost, but it was her same exalted, queenly position that caused her to be so wholeheartedly condemned by her contemporaries.

Queen Anula was the first woman in our recorded history to reign in her own sovereign right. She ascended the throne in 47 B.C. and though her reign was brief, it was unique in a tragic sense. Though at first her position as queen-regnant was not openly challenged, none except her immediate circle of licentious associates would have hailed it with joy and satisfaction. Neither did she reach her high position with the blessing of her subjects or the approval of the ministers, though for some time these were forced to tolerate her, being powerless to dethrone her, until a

suitably strong successor could be persuaded to come forward and challenge her authority.

Anula's story is an astonishing one. Her husband, Coranaga, was incredibly a son of the doughty hero Vattagamani Abhaya. The prince is clearly described in the Chronicle as "a rebel and an evildoer."

Vattagamani had ruled in peace for twelve years after re-establishing himself as overlord of an united Lanka. His brother's son Mahaculi Mahatissa succeeded him after his death. Mahaculi was an exemplary ruler, filled with a great sense of responsibility towards his subjects and pious and reverent in his attitude towards the Brotherhood.

It is related of him that for some time he even renounced his royal status to work as a labourer in a rice-field and later in a sugar-mill. Possessed of an ideal of kingship far ahead of his times, it may be Mahaculi Mahatissa desired to learn at first hand the manner of life and working conditions of his people. He undertook these labours in disguise and members of his court alone were aware of their king's exceptional actions. He used the money earned thereby, enhanced with that from his own royal treasury, to give alms to the Brotherhood.

"During the reign of Mahaculi, Coranaga wandered through the island leading the

life of a robber ; returning at the demise of the king he assumed the monarchy ; and in the places which had denied him asylum during his marauding career, he impiously destroyed the viharas . . . eighteen viharas did this fool destroy."

There were many wild, wanton companions to encourage the prince in all manner of villainy. Irresponsibly, foolishly he was lured to his destruction. Finally a marked deterioration of behaviour immutably set in.

Considering his ghastly way of life, the gross and unjust acts he committed before and after he became king, his brutal persecution of the Brotherhood, it is surprising that Coranaga ruled for twelve years. At the end he met his death disastrously and by the hand of his own wife " . . . eating poisoned fruit that his consort gave him." The last poetic touch is added to his ignoble career when the Chronicler adds that Coranaga was " . . . reborn in the Lokantarika hell."

His death was not mourned. Rather it was regarded with relief, even by those who condemned Anula's action. Mahaculika's son, Tissa, was consecrated king in succession, and none at first suspected that Anula's appalling act was part of a well-conceived, carefully guarded plan.

Tissa ruled precariously for three years. During this time the evil shadow of his cousin's wife, hovered menacingly over him. He was beset by fear of her and anxiety as to his imminent fate. He knew she had done her husband to death because she had become enamoured of one of the palace-guards, an ambitious youth, who saw in Anula's infatuation for him great potential for the success of his own career. Soon she had dealt summarily and cruelly with King Tissa, as she had done with her husband. She succeeded in poisoning the monarch and becoming the ruler of Lanka, raising her lover to the heights of the throne itself.

"For love of this same palace-guard, Anula now killed Tissa also by poison and gave the government into the hands of the other.'..'

To consolidate her position and that of the lowborn husband she had raised to kingly dignity, Anula murdered also the rightful heir to the throne, Coranaga's son by another queen.

Anula of Lanka might well rank with Catherine de Medici and Lucretia Borgia as one of the great woman poisoners of history. Poison was her favourite method of ridding herself of mostly anyone she no longer desired to keep in her company; it was the chief means she employed to rid herself of

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men she had tired of. We know nothing of Anula's antecedents. We do not know whether she was a woman of royal blood or a beautiful commoner who had fascinated Coranaga during his own licentious wanderings through the country, before he ascended the throne.

A significant fact about her amours was that she was often attracted to men of low birth ; men who were perhaps physically attractive, but had little breeding and none of the courtly ways. This may give an inkling of her background and some may deduce from this curious behaviour-pattern that Anula sprang from the dregs of society herself.

But the fact that she is referred to as Coranaga's "consort" and was able to take over the sovereignty, strongly suggests she was a princess of a royal house. In those times it would have been most unlikely that a woman of low birth could have boldly taken upon herself the umbrella of royal dignity, especially such a lewd and unscrupulously immoral creature as Anula.

Had she been then a princess, such actions as hers alone would have made her detestable to the court and ruling class. In her age it was considered the unforgivable crime for

a high born woman to mix intimately with men who sprang from lower rank than her own.

The palace-guard Siva, who was elevated to the throne by the infatuated Anula, did not however survive for long.

“When the palace-guard whose name was Siva, and who (had been) the first of the gate-watchmen, had made Anula his queen he reigned a year and two months in the city ; but Anula who was enamoured of the Damila Vatuka did him (Siva) to death with poison and gave the reign to Vatuka.”

So Siva's glory was short lived. Anula who had even descended to the inferior rank of Queen Consort to exalt him, had tired of the man. She was infatuated with another, and therefore had to be rid of Siva.

Vatuka was a carpenter plying his craft contentedly in the city of Anuradhapura, when Anula's lascivious eye fell upon him. Knowing well his predecessor's terrible fate, yet with the incessant optimism of mortals, Vatuka “. . . made Anula his queen and then reigned a year and two months in the city.”

Undoubtedly it was not merely possession of the queen alone, but the high position marriage to her gave those insignificant men, that attracted them and acted as a spur to

their dormant ambition, finally leading them to their ruin.

Soon Anula noticed a presentable wood-carrier, Tissa, who had come on business to the palace, and Vatuka's days were numbered.

"When Anula one day saw a wood-carrier, who had come to the house, she fell in love with him and when she had killed Vatuka with poison, she gave the government into his hands."

Tissa alone of all the unfortunate men who were transiently desired by the amorous Anula, succeeded in leaving some monument of his all too brief reign to posterity.

"Tissa, the wood-carrier, when he had made Anula his queen, ruled one year and one month in the city. In haste he had a bathing tank made in the Mahamegavana."

The gruesome pattern repeated itself. The insatiable queen observed a young and attractive Brahman in the palace precincts. Learning that he was one of the palace priests she arranged for him to attend upon her. She was now lusting for him, having lost all interest in the manly wood-carrier.

"Anula, enslaved by passion for a Damila Niliya, a brahmin . . . and eager to be united with him, did Tissa the wood-carrier to death giving him poison and gave the government into (Niliya's) hands."

Niliya was not as competent in affairs of government as he was physically attractive, for it is said that "... he reigned constantly upheld by her." Or her constant vigilance may have been necessary due to his unpopularity with her ministers.

On this occasion Anula's infatuation lasted only six months. Then Niliya too was put to death by her cold-blooded but ever effective method of poisoning, because "... the princess Anula desired to take her pleasure even as she listed, with thirty-two of the palace-guards."

Niliya is the last recorded victim of her wild, uncontrollable passions. After his death she reigned alone for four months. Perhaps no man was willing to risk his life as her husband, even though she offered him not only herself, but also her kingdom.

Anula glides through the Mahavamsa like a phantom of evil. Always yearning for pleasures of the flesh, she gave full rein to her unbridled passions. The Mahavamsa description is that she was "enslaved by passion ;" a woman of immoderate, unrestrained sexual appetite.

But who can tell how greatly she had been influenced for evil by her husband Coranaga himself? He may have helped to nurture any seeds of vice already inherent in her

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character and his bad example would have encouraged her to further depravity.

A court revolves round, takes its tone and atmosphere from the tastes and personality of the sovereign. In Anula's court hedonism reigned supreme and full gratification of the senses was evidently the ceaseless desire of the queen and her close companions. Those who disapproved and dissented, who refused to participate in this mad carousel lived in danger. Constantly stalked by fear and terror. The old, sound, accepted, cherished values and rules of conduct were callously disregarded. How else could a carpenter and a wood-carrier have become king? Decent men of honour could no longer remain in safety either in the palace or in the city.

But there is no evidence that Anula, in spite of all her wickedness, persecuted Buddhism or destroyed its outward symbols as Coranaga had done. She would of course hardly have had the time or inclination for affairs of the spirit. Preoccupied as she was with her lusts, religion would have been of little significance to her, and while she did not actively persecute the Brotherhood, she would not have rendered any active assistance to them as her illustrious forebears had done. In any event it is unlikely she did

any of the pious works that won the approbation of the ancient Chronicler and brought lasting fame on Lanka's monarchs. Anula built no temples, endowed no religious houses, celebrated no religious festivals, failed to give assistance to the Brotherhood, as far as we are aware.

The kingdom was at last rescued by King Mahaculika's second son, Kutankannatissa, "... who had fled from fear of Anula and had taken the pabbajja (ordination)." At the frantic insistence of a sickened and terrified people the prince returned with an army gathered from the provinces. Anula's paramours and her roisterous companions did not relish the prospect of taking up arms in her defence. True to character, they discreetly deserted her no sooner they realised her impending doom.

Anula herself did not attempt to escape. She did not flee to safety. She remained in the palace, bold and wanton to the end, adorned in her queenly garments, hoping perhaps to captivate one of her enemies and thereby save her life, or too proud to run away from her fate.

Her dreadful end may be regarded as justice for her evil deeds. "When he had slain the wicked Anula, the ruler of men (Kutankannatissa) reigned for twenty-two

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years." But it is nonetheless horrible to contemplate that her burning palace was also her own funeral pyre. "When he (Kutan-kannatissa) had burned the licentious Anula in the palace (upon the funeral pyre) he withdrawing a little (distance) from thence, built a new palace."

The king shrank from the very sight of her abode and destroyed completely every trace of the scene of so much debauchery. Thus ended Anula's tragic but pathetic career. Viewing her actions from this distance of time, in a more enlightened age, when the science of psychology has revealed ramifications of abnormal behaviour, we can only conclude that Queen Anula was sick with the sad and terrible malady of nymphomania. An unfortunate victim of her own searing and tortuous lust. In the anonymity of ordinary life she may have passed unnoticed except in her own immediate circle, but as a queen it was impossible for Anula to escape notoriety and censure in an age which painted vice and virtue boldly black or white, and did not understand the more subtle nuances of colour in the characters of human beings.

RATANAVALI

NINE KINGS named Parakrama Bahu ruled in Lanka. Their reigns spanned four centuries. But only the first of their name has been lauded by posterity as "the Great." Remarkable and renowned, his life and achievements related in the greater part of the Culavamsa, merited such distinction. He strides across the pages of history as a giant. His aggressive policies and brilliant exploits, his deep sense of national dignity and the splendour of his court captured the admiration and respect of those not only in his own land, but in the whole of south east Asia.

His name remains enshrined in our annals as one who brought fame and prosperity; a brilliant, rich, golden age of a nation whose heroic era had seemingly passed. He infused a new, surging sense of pride and magnificence into a people war-torn and weary, battered by decades of foreign domination and internal anarchy, inspiring them to perform such wonders and glories they themselves had long forgotten.

As one gazes in awe at the eight-hundred-year-old ruins of his capital city of Polonnaruwa, one cannot fail to understand why so much hero-worship has been paid to this king. In the midst of fallen masonry,

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damaged statues, broken columns, the fissured ruins of palaces, swimming baths, temples, dagobas and shrinerooms, the glory and the grandeur of his era is yet plainly visible. And it is easy to excuse the exaggeration, the deliberate hyperbole indulged by the monk who composed the king's epic life story. Parakrama Bahu bestrode the 12th century like a Colossus, and lesser mortals could only gape wide-eyed and idolise him !

So much has been written of his words and deeds that we may be tempted to overlook the fact that the great Parakrama Bahu was also human. That like all humans he was born of a woman, nurtured by her and in many ways instructed, guided and influenced by the woman who was his mother.

Ratanaivali, the mother of Parakrama Bahu I, was the daughter of Vijayabahu I who united Lanka after seventy-seven years of Cola rule. One of the most valiant warrior-kings of Ceylon, Vijayabahu I overcame great danger and hardship to achieve his ends, to found a new dynasty and establish his capital at Polonnaruwa. Displaying a great devotion to duty and compassion towards all his subjects, he reigned with wisdom and piety for many decades. It has been written of him : " It may be an overstatement to say : ' Had there been no Vijayabahu, there

would perhaps have been no Sinhalese in Ceylon today.' But beyond the shadow of a doubt, he was the author of Sinhalese freedom and one of the chief architects of Sinhalese nationality." Ratanavali's mother was the Kalinga princess, Tilokasundari, King Vijayabahu's second wife.

Now Vijayabahu was deeply fond of his large family. Like a benevolent patriarch, he arranged the marriages of all his immediate heirs before his death. Among the dynastic unions settled by him was that of his daughter Ratanavali to Prince Manabharana, eldest son of his sister Mitta, who had married a Pandu prince.

"Vijayabahu versed in signs perceived on none of his other daughters except Ratanavali the sign of the birth of a son furnished with the signs of power."

Perhaps this is how the Chronicler quaintly chose to explain that Ratanavali was exceptional in her own way, from her early youth, as her distinguished son would later be. It may have been only a poet's fancy and a desire to honour the great Parakrama Bahu, but we find that Vijayabahu on that occasion predicted his grandson's brilliant future.

"Vijayabahu seized by loving kindness, called Ratanavali to him, kissed her on the head and with tender joy spake to her thus :

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‘ This thy body shall be the place for the birth of a son who will surpass all former and future monarchs in glorious qualities ; generosity, wisdom and heroism, who will be able to keep Lanka forever in safety and united under one umbrella, who will be in perfect wise a patron of the Order, and who will display an abundant and fine activity.’ ”

It is significant however, that of all his numerous offspring Ratanavali was her father’s best-loved child. She alone was chosen to receive his solemn and affectionate blessing before his death.

The unity and peace which Vijayabahu had strived and achieved for his kingdom at great cost, did not, alas, last longer than his own lifetime. Shortly after his death, no sooner were the funeral obsequies over when inner dissension which wreaked havoc in the country, spread. His sister Mitta plotted with their younger brother Jayabahu who was now king to usurp the rightful heir Vikkamabahu, Vijayabahu’s son, and instal her own son, Manabharana, Ratanavali’s husband as uparaja ; “ thereby quitting the path of former custom,” for the ancient Sinhalese right of succession rested on patriarchy. Some traces of an older matriarchy however yet existed for the monarch’s sister’s son always had a special position in the

royal family and played an important role in court affairs, being designated by the term "bhagineyya." Mitta no doubt applied this old, almost obsolete custom to her ambitious plans to dethrone the legal heir and put forward her son's tenuous claim to the sovereignty.

Prince Vikkamabahu was adipada of Ruhuna at the time of his father's death. No formal message was sent to him of his father's demise. But no sooner he heard of it and learned also of the plots being hatched by his aunt, he returned in all haste and thwarted the plans of his enemies. After a period of strife and civil war during which the land was torn by rival factions, he succeeded in displacing his uncle Jayabahu. Rajarata with Polonnaruwa as the capital was his ; the rest of the island was divided among his cousins, Mitta's three sons. Manabharana the eldest ruled over the province of Dakkinadesa comprising the southwest of the island with his capital at Dadigama in the Kegalle District. His two brothers ruled in Ruhuna.

But it was a time of seething unrest and ceaseless border warfare between the princes and their loyalists. The peace and order established by Vijayabahu was completely disrupted. Vikkamabahu was not formally

consecrated king although Jayabahu, a puppet in the hands of his sister Mitta, had fled with her to Manabharana's court in Dakkinadesa. The precious Tooth and Bowl Relics had been secretly spirited away from Polonnaruwa by a set of bhikkhus. Vikkamabahu had persecuted. The country was reduced to woeful straits and anarchy reigned supreme.

"The officers belonging to the retinue of the monarchs on both sides who were established on the frontiers, fought with each other continually. By setting fire to many flourishing villages and market towns, by piercing tanks filled with water, by destroying everywhere the weirs on all the canals and by hewing down all useful trees like the coconut palm and others, they in fighting with each other, so devastated the kingdom that it was impossible to trace even the sites of the old villages. And even the rulers did evil to the people letting their retainers plunder the towns and commit highway robbery. The slaves too and the workmen of people of good family despised their masters without respect and void of all fear. They became mercenaries to the kings and worming themselves into their confidence, they, by means of offices conferred on them, attained even greater power. The people in places difficult of access like the Samantakuta and

so forth, no longer paid to the monarch the taxes formerly levied on them. They despised the king, became renegades and dwelt independent each in his own region."

Princess Ratanavali, remembering her father's predictions longed passionately for the son who would fulfil them and unite Lanka "under one umbrella" once more. So far she had borne only two daughters; Mitta and Pabhavati, both beautiful and charming, but it was for a son she yearned.

Her husband was equally disappointed that a son had not been born to them. In anxious frustration the prince brooded: "We are sprung from the pure dynasty of the Moon, highly esteemed in the world, at the head of all royal houses. In outward appearance we are enviable, distinguished by every aptitude, experienced in the various sciences, skilful in the managing of elephants and horses and the like. And yet we have over and over again suffered defeat in fight by the single Vikkamabahu and there is no prospect of the birth of a son who would be capable of wiping out this stain. What avails me of a royal dignity which is defiled by the evil tattle of the people? I must now give up my bent to worldly things and spend my days unweariedly in pious works."

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Manabharana forsook his royal duties and decided to lead the life of an ascetic. He left the palace and lived in solitude for some months, camping one night in a temple of God Indra. Towards dawn the prince had a strange and wonderful dream. A heavenly deity appeared to him and announced that he would soon father "a splendid son furnished with all the tokens of power," and bade him go back with all speed to the town where his wife and children lived.

Both Manabharana and Ratanavali were overjoyed at this "sign from heaven" and thereafter in pious hope "... with the wish for a distinguished son, amassed all kinds of good deeds, such as almsgiving, the observing of moral precepts and the like."

Manabharana had another significant dream soon after his return to his capital. In this vision he saw himself leading by the ear a beautiful calf-elephant, pure-white, into the sleeping chamber of his queen. He awoke, eagerly went to her room, and related to her this singular manifestation. It so happened that Ratanavali too had seen a similar vision that very night.

"I also in a dream have embraced such a young elephant. It walked round my bed, its right side turned towards it ; then stood still. Drawing it by the trunk to me and

raising it up to my couch I tenderly embraced it."

The Chronicler then records that the prince and princess spent the hours till daybreak "... waiting joyfully without slumbering ...". Filled with inexpressible joy and wonder and the overwhelming excitement of their strange visions, they would naturally like any parents have discussed their dreams, and made many plans for the son they were now almost certain would be born to them.

In the morning the palace soothsayers confirmed their hopes. Soon after, Ratanavali found herself with child, and Manabharana in his great joy "... had an ample pregnancy gift bestowed on his queen." In due time "at a moment marked by a lucky constellation ..." she brought forth her son. Great ambition for him was born in her at the same time.

The proud parents sent the joyful tidings to all the other rulers in Lanka. Ratanavali's brother Vikkamabahu who reigned in Polonnaruwa, remembering perhaps their father's glowing prophecies regarding the future of this child, desired to adopt the baby prince and make him heir to the throne of Rajarata. He sent his messengers to Dakkinadesa bearing costly gifts for his nephew. But the fond

parents had no intention of parting with their beloved son.

Traditional ceremonies were carried out, with all solemnity of such occasions in the young prince's life as on his "naming day ;" when his ears were pierced and when he was fed his first rice-foods. His mother like everyone else believed in the importance of all these age-old customs and they were specially auspicious and significant events for her.

Sorrow then struck the close-knit family when Manabharana died while his son was yet a child. Ratanavali was deeply grieved for she and her husband had lived a "harmonious life" together. To her sorrow was added a natural apprehension for her son's future. She was fully aware of the unsettled and perilous conditions of the time and of the reverses in store for them.

Kitsirimegha, Manabharana's second brother became ruler of Dakkinadesa, and the youngest, Sri Vallabha was appointed overlord of the whole of Ruhuna. It was arranged that the widow and her children (there were now five of them) make their home at the court of Ruhuna.

Ratanavali was a proud woman, the daughter of a king, "an ornament of the Sun dynasty" and it would not have been

easy for her to renounce her power and position, but at that time she had no other choice. Although she lived at her brother-in-law's court and permitted him to supervise her son's upbringing, she was not in favour of a proposal made to marry her eldest daughter to Sri Vallabha's son. She spoke out her disapproval, boldly and fearlessly, to the prince of Ruhuna.

"After the prince named Vijaya had slain all the yakkhas and made this island habitable for men, since then one has allied the family of Vijaya with ours by unions above all with scions of the Kalinga line. Union with other princes was also hitherto unknown with us save with kings of the Moon dynasty. How then just because he is your son, could there be for us a union with that prince?"

Despite her protests the marriage took place and later her second daughter Pabhavati was also wedded to Sri Vallabha's son, as his second mahesi. No doubt the queen was bitter and bided her time, meanwhile sowing seeds of ambition in her own son.

Ratanavali now emerges in all the inherent strength and determination of her remarkable character. She was a woman lacking in sentiment; purposeful and clear-eyed about her aims. Her love for her son was the strongest emotion of her nature, but she did

not seek to keep him at her side. Instead this love for him impelled her to do her utmost to help him achieve their mutual ambitions. She knew the task that lay before him was far from simple ; that there was a great deal to prepare for ; much to be accomplished before the kingdom they so ardently desired to possess for themselves became theirs.

She perceived there were more possibilities for his progress at the court of his uncle at Dakkinadesa, the traditional seat of the heir to the throne, and she urged him to leave Ruhuna for the palace at Dadigama. Being a sagacious youth who already displayed signs of maturity and understanding beyond his years, he knew his mother was fully devoted to his cause and took her advice. With courage and resolution she withstood her separation from him until the time should be ripe for their active campaign to begin. Meanwhile she had important though unspectacular work to perform on his behalf covertly and cautiously, surrounded as they were by enemies.

Ratanavali comes again into the spotlight of recorded history when Parakrama Bahu needed her help some years afterwards. Having completed an education fitting to his status, and acquired a training in all the princely arts at his uncle's court, Parakrama

Bahu decided it was time to go to Polonnaruwa and survey the possibilities for him there. Vikkamabahu had died leaving his kingdom to his son Gajabahu. When Parakrama Bahu appeared at the borders of his kingdom Gajabahu welcomed him although unwillingly, for very probably he was rather suspicious of his brilliant cousin even then, from reports that had reached him.

Parakrama Bahu certainly did not waste time in Polonnaruwa. He moved closely with the people, winning them over subtly to his side, and establishing an excellent espionage system through which he learned the innermost secrets of his cousin's court. Soon it became apparent that the king resented his presence in the kingdom. With the invaluable assistance of his mother, Parakrama Bahu took a characteristic step in an effort to allay Gajabahu's suspicions and win his friendship.

"He sent a letter to his mother who was dwelling in Ruhuna, fetched thence his younger sister, the charming princess Bhaddavati, as well as abundant money, under the pretext that it was her property. The money he took to himself but the princess he wedded to Gajabahu."

There must have been a perfect rapport of understanding and accord between mother

and son, for so much to have been accomplished by means of a letter. Very probably their messengers were also very active on their behalf and completely dedicated to their cause.

Despite these measures, there came a time when Gajabahu no longer wanted his bold cousin in his kingdom. Parakrama Bahu realised it was time to leave. He lingered however on the border between the two kingdoms, loath to return to his uncle Kit-sirimegha. He remembered that he had left Dadigama without his uncle's permission, thereby displeasing him, and had further incurred his relative's displeasure by having perhaps unwittingly caused the death of a trusted senapati.

The news was brought to Ratanavali in Ruhuna that her son tarried at the frontier and she immediately realised that his reluctance to go back to his uncle was because of being doubtful of a welcome. She also knew that he was too ashamed to appeal directly for her aid, but she was his mother and would take necessary steps to smooth the way for him.

She arrived in Dakkinadesa with all possible speed. Tactfully and diplomatically she interceded with her brother-in-law on her son's behalf. She pleaded youthful exuberance

and impetuosity on his part ; reminded the boy's uncle of her son's admirable qualities and numerous, obvious talents ; and it may be she even whispered a hint of his ultimate destiny.

Kitsirimegha had no sons to succeed him. He had always liked his clever, beautiful sister-in-law and admired her shrewd, quick wit. He also cared deeply for his brother's son and was prepared to forgive and reinstate the prince in his favour. So Ratanavali, rejoicing that she had effected a reconciliation between her son and his uncle, went and fetched Parakrama Bahu to the palace. The king welcomed the youth and declared him his rightful heir.

Shortly after, Kitsirimegha passed away. Ratanavali remained most of the time with her son, because the ensuing years were filled with plots and intrigues. With her keen intelligence and shrewd insight, she now played a key role. Battle followed battle, and while there were many heroic successes to celebrate, there were also galling and humiliating reverses to endure. Uniting Lanka under one ruler was no easy task. Much had to be achieved by guile and diplomacy as well as by force of arms. Ratanavali's son was undaunted by the obstacles in his path. Already he had, in

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his own words, "... even at the beginning of the enterprise seen (in anticipation) its fulfilment." At the very commencement of his campaign he had repudiated his ministers: "What is there in the world that cannot be carried out by people of energy?" And his mother stood by and inwardly applauded her strong-willed, insatiable son.

At last the day they had long dreamed of, planned and fought desperately for, arrived. His uncles and cousins dead, his enemies dispersed or killed, Parakrama Bahu entered into his kingdom. His second coronation took place in Polonnaruwa with fitting majesty and splendour. Ratanavali's chariot of gold encrusted with sparkling gems followed close behind his, in the triumphal procession through the streets of the gaily bedecked city.

The Chronicler records that the sight of their splendid monarch, clad in all his royal finery, handsome and stately, every inch a king, "made moist the eyes of the women by the water of their tears of joy." Ratanavali's eyes misted too with pride and happiness as she beheld her magnificent son, but that regal lady would not permit herself to shed even tears of joy. She was of much sterner stuff and she believed that tears were inauspicious for such a joyful occasion anyhow.

The admiration and love her son bore her is amply displayed again in the noble gesture he made after her death. Among the stupendous and beautiful monuments built by King Parakrama Bahu I was the Ratanavali-cetiya, at Yudanganawa, near Buttala, the site of his mother's cremation. A fitting and dignified tribute from a devoted son to his loving mother.

SUGALA

TRAVELLING along the peaceful, picturesque roads that run through Ceylon's eastern hills, from Bibile to Mahiyangana, back to the Galoya valley and then thrusting northwards to Polonnaruwa, it is difficult to believe that the now placid terrain was often the scene of bitter battles in ancient and medieval times.

Along the curving highways and narrow, twisting byways that existed here in the 12th century, skirting bleak hills, and winding through thickly forested valleys, a woman rode and marched with her armies. In the forts her soldiers had hastily built along the frontier of the province of Ruhuna, she sometimes rested briefly and inspired them with fresh zeal to continue their long, gruelling campaign.

At times she was the glorious victor, triumphantly riding over the flowing stream of white 'pavada' laid out on the roadways in her honour and in veneration of the precious burden she carried with her. When danger approached uncomfortably close or when her hardy soldiers suffered setbacks in battle she fled deeper into the mountains or took refuge in towns and villages where the people were steadfastly loyal to her, and inflexible in their dedication to her cause.

Throughout the long and arduous campaign described in the Culavamsa as the Conquest of Rohona which lasted ten years, this woman, a queen, led the prolonged and tenacious resistance of the stout-hearted, sturdy southerners to the dominion of the great King Parakrama Bahu I over their land ; refusing to acknowledge him as their rightful overlord. During the greater part of those years of travail and turmoil she bore in her keeping the two most sacred treasures in Lanka, guarding them solicitously with the belief that as long as she had the Sacred Bowl and Tooth relics in her possession, her cause was not altogether lost.

Queen Sugala of Ruhuna was one of the bitterest opponents of King Parakrama Bahu I. Twice this powerful and ambitious prince had been crowned king of Lanka in his royal city of Polonnaruwa. All the princes who had opposed his aspirations—his uncles and cousins—were dead ; their commanders killed or imprisoned. Only Sugala, his aunt still remained to dispute his succession to the throne. She refused to submit to his power and glory and obstinately determined to overthrow the regime he had established over the land.

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The Culavamsa Chronicler deliberately extols the virtues and achievements of Parakrama Bahu. Obviously writing this paean of praise during the king's lifetime, he could do nothing else but condemn Sugala's actions. But modern historians tend to agree that Parakrama Bahu's accession to the throne was not hailed with approval and satisfaction by all his subjects. The kingdom of Ruhuna which had been ruled by his uncle, Sri Valabha, Sugala's husband and later by his cousin, her son Manabharana, challenged his sovereignty over the whole island. They disputed his right to rule, even though the rest of Lanka had been brought under his sway.

"The Queen Sugala who had not a mind capable of reflection and was inclined herself by nature to evil, let the words of those people (her supporters in Ruhuna) influence her."

With this harsh judgement the Chronicler dismisses her. But the outcome of war is that the victor is right! His character is without blemish. His cause just and worthy.

Sugala was no longer a young woman when she was thrust into the limelight of history. The grand-daughter of Vijayabahu I, through the king's first marriage to Lilavati, daughter of Jagatipala, a prince from Oudh in India who had briefly ruled over Ruhuna and had

later been slain by the Colas, Sugala was possessed with a high degree of her noble grandfather's brave and indomitable character.

Vijayabahu, in his zeal to make suitable marriage alliances for his kith and kin and thereby ensure peace in the land he loved so well, had given his granddaughter in marriage to his sister's youngest son, Prince Sri Vallabha. In the civil war that followed soon after the old king's death, the country was divided into numerous petty kingdoms. Sri Vallabha was apportioned a part of the ancient province of Ruhuna.

There Sugala had lived quietly since her marriage, and to this court, after her husband's death had come Queen Ratanavali, Sugala's sister-in-law with her five young children ; among them the bold and ambitious young prince, Parakrama Bahu. Manabharana's demise had made it necessary for his queen to leave their principality of Dakkinadesa which fell to the inheritance of the second of the trio of brothers, Kitsirimegha; and Ratanavali decided to make her home with Sugala's family in Ruhuna.

In those early days she no doubt loved her young sister-in-law. To live with Sugala was clearly more appealing to Ratanavali than to remain in her one-time palace so

full of poignant memories, and now the residence of her sister and brother-in-law. But the feeling of accord between the two women was short-lived. There was too much at stake. Both were mothers of only sons whom they passionately loved. Both were opportunists. Regal, daring and ambitious ; determined to ensue the success of their offspring in every way. It was a time when chaos reigned unfettered in the land, and intrigue was rife.

Sugala became aware early of the salient schemes being insidiously laid by the wily Ratanavali and her enterprising son, and the sanguine hopes for their future. She made up her mind to oppose them with all her power. In turn she prepared her own son, Manabharana, to meet the threats ahead of him. She goaded him to be his cousin's life-long, implacable foe. She watched with veiled resentment and anxious trepidation for her son's safety and the welfare of her kingdom, as Ratanavali calculated every step of Parakrama Bahu's career. She cleverly played the hospitable hostess, the loving aunt, the friendly sister-in-law, but envy and jealousy raged within her, for she soon recognised the eminent and exceptional traits of her nephew's character. She continued to be cordial to his mother who was after

all her guest, even after he left Ruhuna to reside at his uncle's court in Dakkinadesa. She stifled her displeasure when the proud Ratanavali disdainfully opposed the union of her son, Prince Manabharana, heir to the throne of Ruhuna, with Ratanavali's daughter Mitta.

After Sri Vallabha's death, Manabharana succeeded as overlord of the province, and Sugala continued to live in womanly seclusion at the court. But she was far from indifferent to the shattering events taking place in the country. On the contrary, she was vibrantly alert to all the momentous happenings engineered by her nephew, who stopped at nothing to gain his ends : the unification of Lanka and dominion over it. How could she be anything else with the blood of doughty Vijayabahu flowing in her veins ? But she was content for the time being, to let her son carry on the war against Parakrama Bahu, confident that he would succeed in vanquishing her nephew.

The subsequent ignominious defeat of Manabharana's forces and his own abject retreat from the city of Polonnaruwa was difficult to accept but she refused to despair.

“ Racked by fear, he left his own children in the lurch, and while heavy rain streamed

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down and thick darkness reigned, he hastened hither and thither, every now and again falling into a deep pit, stumbling amid the undergrowth of the forest, ever and anon starting with fear, his heart filled with terror, to the Mahavalukaganga (Mahaveli). But fearing that if he fled by a well known ford, the foe pursuing might take him alive, he crossed the river with difficulty at some unknown ford and regained courage for a moment. But as he had exceeding fear of the able-bodied inhabitants of the country, he wandered in disguise full of terror from village to village and so fleeing came to his own province, stripped of everything."

His children including his young heir Sri Vallabha, were taken as hostages and prisoners. His scattered treasures were seized together with his elephants, horses, battle equipment and weapons. The king's generals were eager to capture Manabharana as well, and set out in pursuit, but in his victory the king was magnanimous to his unfortunate cousin, permitting him to flee to the safety of Ruhuna.

Broken and defeated, Manabharana reached the palace of Ruhuna where his mother awaited him. Shortly after, crushed with the humiliation of defeat, he was smitten with an incurable disease and died an untimely

death. Considering subsequent events, it is hard to believe the Chronicler when he quotes Prince Manabharana's death-bed enjoinder to his stricken family and his ministers : " Go thou without ruining thyself as I (have ruined) myself, to the sovereign Parakrama ; do that which he orders thee and live devoted to him as he shall direct thee."

Her son's plight aroused Queen Sugala's sympathy and made her even more fiercely determined on a course of vengeance. With his death all the subdued and latent fire and passion in her nature surged in a fierce desire for revenge. All her warrior-like instincts were aroused against her nephew. She was one in heart and mind with the rebels of Ruhuna when they came seeking her assistance and co-operation. It would not have needed much persuasion for her to join them ; to listen to the pleas and promises of her nephew's enemies. Was she not the king's most pitiless foe ?

" Thy grief, O Queen, called for by Manabharana's death, shall not torment thy heart as it pleases. Who then so long as we are in life shall enter this our land with its many inaccessible fastnesses ? . . . Shall we ever permit a hostile army even to set eyes on our country with its rivers, mountains and ravines ? "

Of course she would not. Instead she would fight to her last breath. She would bitterly resist every attempt on the king's part to subjugate the kingdom of Ruhuna, which she now regarded as her own. She would oppose him with every means at her command and spend the rest of her life in vindicating her dead son's cause ; harrying her upstart, royal nephew ; disrupting the peace it was his aim to establish. And how could she not succeed when she had in her possession the palladium of the country : the Sacred Bowl and Tooth Relics ?

Her name now resounded in the din of battle ; the clash of swords and beat of wardrums ; the whine of death-dealing arrows whizzing through the brittle air ; the wild screams of men lusting for their enemies' blood ; the piercing wail of flutes ; the stirring clash of cymbals as soldiers marched to war. Sugala, the rebel queen fearless, undaunted ; incredibly, heroically brave, would have conducted a furious campaign ; always ready to guard with her life if necessary the precious relics in her keeping ; willing to die gloriously for the cause she believed in.

It was an age of anarchy, in spite of Parakrama Bahu's efforts to establish law and order in the land. Brother's hand was

against brothers' ; sisters' against sister. Sugala was chiefly motivated in this bitter feud, by her own, deep-seated, personal antagonism . Her hatred and animosity to Parakrama Bahu and his family. She was angry and outraged at the ruthless manner he employed to gain possession of the realm ; striking down and destroying those who stood in his way. She was aware he had treated his cousins with a measure of forbearance, but she refused to give him any credit for this virtue, attributing it to sheer expediency and a desire to gain popularity with the people. She was an ambitious woman and believed that her right to the throne was as just as his ; both being grandchildren of the great Vijayabahu I. If she was unable to achieve sovereignty over all Lanka, at least she would ensure that she retained the suzerainty of her province of Ruhuna.

"The whole population of the country (Ruhuna) down to the very boys," joined her in open revolt.

Entrenching themselves securely in their forest fastnesses for several months ; surrounded on all sides by the high natural mountain barriers they stoutly resisted long sieges and bitter battles. Their fortifications were so firm and well built that the gates were

“not to be shaken even by rutting elephants.” But Parakrama Bahu was in a position to despatch unlimited reinforcements and Queen Sugala’s defences perforce began to steadily crumble, though she herself did not lose heart. Indeed for a long time she succeeded in giving her royal nephew many uneasy moments. In the end he had to use the full force of his “four-membered” army against her.

Fearful, bitter fights were a constant feature of this campaign, in which the king’s army suffered as many reverses as the rebels. The king sent his toughest, most valorous generals to conduct the Ruhuna campaign, but at times even they were forced to admit that their task was more arduous and formidable than they had imagined.

At a moment when Sugala’s army was extremely hard-pressed and the battle waged at its fiercest, Sukarabhatudeva, who had served valiantly under her son and had been taken prisoner by the king during Manabharana’s abortive campaign and placed in chains, “burst his fetters” and escaped from a dungeon in Polonnaruwa to the battle-front at Ruhuna. There he fought with conspicuous bravery for his queen. But as the action took a drastic turn when the king’s army gained relentlessly upon them,

Sugala was advised to flee from Atthasahassaka where her husband had ruled, to a place of greater safety.

Taking with her the sacred relics she sought refuge in the district of Uruvela (Etimole in the Moneragala district). But decisive victories by the king's men made even this retreat unsafe, and Sugala conceived a daring plan. She would cross the seas ! She would sail to Jambudipa in India where she could soon enlist the support of the king's foes in South India. With an army gathered from the peninsular, she could return once more to Lanka, and destroy her nephew completely. She would take with her the sacred relics, knowing full well that without them Parakrama Bahu's consecration as Lanka's monarch was incomplete, unhallowed. His power and royal magnificence a hollow, empty spectacle.

However the king through his most efficient espionage system soon learned of her wild plans. He commanded his generals to prevent her escape by every means in their power, and ordered them to make more intensive efforts to conquer the hostile army and obtain the precious relics. It was of vital importance and he would not brook any more delays or defeats. In a short while the king's general Rakha inflicted a

humiliating retreat of Queen Sugala's troops and succeeded in taking possession of the relics she had guarded and cherished for so long.

A humbler nature than hers may at that point have yielded to her misfortune, given up the uneven contest and retired into oblivion, accepting the inevitability of her sad fate. But defeat served only to spur Queen Sugala to fresh endeavours. It impelled her to make a more determined attempt to fulfil her wishes. She wanted the complete independence of Ruhuna-rata and its people from the domination of her nephew.

So the wearying campaign went on with enhanced violence on both sides. Whole villages were destroyed in the numerous bloody encounters between the rival troops, with much hardship and suffering to the people. Heroic acts of bravery were recorded on both sides, and yet the war continued ; the rebels remained unsubdued.

The king had realised this was no minor insurrection led by a handful of hotheads, but a planned, concentrated effort by desperate, resolute men who bitterly hated him and were determined not to yield to his wishes. He weighed the calibre of his chief adversary and ruefully admitted *she* was a rival to be reckoned with. He knew there

would be no peace or unity in his kingdom as long as this woman remained free ; a rallying point for those opposed to his rule. In one great final attempt therefore he threw the entire weight of his vast, well-equipped army against Sugala's scattered forces, and her soldiers, though second to none in strategy and courage, did not have the same resources, the sheer superiority of numbers as the king's men.

He ordered his generals to rout Ruhuna and capture the queen. But they who had more intimate knowledge of the ways and wiles and sharp, clever tactics of the rebels, reflected :

"An indecisive battle with these people is the same as a defeat . . . Let us therefore break in pieces the foe like small sugar canes, fling them into the water of the river and make them food for the fish and the turtle, otherwise it is we who shall still hunger . . ."

Bold words. But the campaign went on for years. Sugala's men knew every inch of their native terrain. Every nook and fold of wooded hill and wide plain. Unseen by the king's forces they would swoop down from mountain-gorges and forested ravines, wreaking havoc among the well-disciplined, orderly army, and before they could be effectively subdued, disappeared into their

jungle hideouts. It seemed they could maintain this type of warfare in different parts of the province endlessly ; that their rebellious spirit could never be quelled. Parakrama Bahu's general, the Adikarin Manju spoke for all those on the side of the king : " So long as the many foes which have broken away . . . and are hidden in the various inaccessible places have not got a footing, let us slay them all, while the enemy who has sought refuge in the wilderness of Atthasahassaka and the Queen Sugala, we will take captive . . . "

In Kumbugama, the Damiladhikarin Rakha, one of the king's doughtiest generals, reflected : " From the time that we set forth to war in Ruhuna the soldiers sent forth by us have here and there in great battles covered the earth with the bones of the foe, and even all the brave warriors who dwell in Jambudipa would not be able to withstand these soldiers. Why then should we henceforward think to carry on war with the foe hidden here and there through fear ? Queen Sugala is the cause of these people becoming rebels and has led them into the wilderness. Therefore we must get the Queen alive into our power."

The generals again prepared for another great battle. " After they had in various

places posted good soldiers, known as courageous people, in the necessary numbers, they advanced thence fully armed, to Kanhavata, and when at the place called Vanagama they caught sight of the hostile army with whom was the Queen, they fought a great and fearful battle. With the sound of their drums of victory cleaving open as it were, the earth, they seized the Queen and all her treasures of many a kind . . . and made the province of Rohana everywhere free of the briers of the rebels”

And so the brave queen was finally taken captive. The conquest of Ruhuna was complete. In the days that followed she sorrowfully watched “justice” being meted out to her gallant followers. Those who remained dedicated to her now lost cause : “those deserving of harshness” were treated with severity. Those who meekly or treacherously submitted : “those who deserved kindness” were won over to the king’s service.

“ At villages and market towns they (the king’s generals) had numbers of stakes set up on which they impaled many hundreds of the enemy Many other foes they hanged on the gallows or burnt . . . while they showed due grace to those who were

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accessible to kindness and were worthy of being treated with kindness : they brought peace to the province, as clouds in the rainy season to a forest burnt by fire."

Sugala's thoughts and emotions as she saw her loyal, spirited subjects killed by the hundreds, her treasures plundered, overwhelmed her with grief and bitter, frustrating anguish. She had staked all—and lost, and it was hardly comforting for a woman of her mettle to reflect that the odds had been against her from the start. The royal captive on her nephew's orders, was taken to Polonnaruwa, the resplendent capital city.

Sugala leaves the pages of history to the sound of drums and flaring of trumpets in honour of the king's victory ; to the joyous shouts of the victors and the anguished groans of the vanquished. But she leaves it with honour ; beaten in combat but unbroken in spirit.

Parakrama Bahu who admired courage and recognised greatness in others would have received her with fitting ceremony. After all, he who had treated his defeated cousins, Gajabahu and Manabharana, with forbearance and compassion, would surely have done the same to his royal, rebel aunt.

KALYANAVATI

One of those women who wore the perilous crown of sovereignty in the turbulent years after the death of Parakrama Bahu I was Kalyanavati the widow of Nissanka Malla. A foreign princess from Kalinga, she ascended the throne in 1202 A.D. Her regal elevation was due chiefly to her having found favour with the kingmakers of the time, who used royalty as pawns in the remorseless game of power they played.

Queens had reigned over Lanka from very early times, and they had the loyalty of the people. But by the beginning of the 13th century the monarchy achieved a dubious dignity. The canker of decay and deterioration of sovereign power had set in and yet the rulers came to be regarded as semi-divine, though this did not save them from being deposed, assassinated, or degraded in times of civil strife or foreign invasion.

In one of his inscriptions, Nissanka Malla had uncompromisingly declared that "in the absence of a male heir possessing the requisite qualifications for sovereignty, the people should place on the throne, a queen or failing her, even a slipper worn by a consecrated king to represent the sovereignty." The edict was boldly quoted when those in her

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favour raised Queen Kalyanavati to the throne.

In the chaotic years that followed Parakrama Bahu's long and glorious reign, succession to the throne fell to almost any man strong enough to establish and maintain his claim. Nissanka Malla, a Kalinga prince, succeeded in overthrowing the tyrant Mahinda, who had usurped the throne by murdering Parakrama Bahu's immediate successor and rightful heir, King Vijayabahu II. Some scholars believe that Nissanka Malla was a son-in-law of Parakrama Bahu. In this case a daughter of Parakrama Bahu must have been one of Nissanka Malla's lesser queens, for the Chronicle records that Kalyanavati was his first mahesi.

The Sinhalese monarchy had established dynastic ties by marriage with Kalinga royalty since the time of King Vijayabahu I in the 11th century. Parakrama Bahu's grandmother, second wife of Vijayabahu I was Tilokasundari, a princess of Kalinga. Nissanka Malla had arrived in Ceylon during his forbear's reign and due perhaps to the close bonds of kinship that existed between him and Vijayabahu II whose father also was a Kalinga prince, he was declared uparaja or heir to the throne.

History records that Nissanka Malla was an astute and able monarch. Though the Culavamsa dismisses his nine year reign in a few, brief sentences, there is ample evidence in his numerous inscriptions that he ruled with wisdom and foresight. He succeeded in establishing once again the rule of law in a land simmering with internal dissensions and threatened by foreign invasion.

His claim to the throne of Lanka being a tenuous one, Nissanka Malla was constrained to impress his people with his imaginary descent from Vijaya, traditional founder of the Sinhalese race, and his dedication to Buddhism. Assailed on all sides by formidable rivals; surrounded by enemies, he had to be strong but tactful in all his dealings. He soon realised that it was imperative to him to win the goodwill and co-operation of the Buddhist Order to maintain his sovereignty. Side by side with him reigned his chief queen, Kalyanavati, who had come to Ceylon with her husband.

After Nissanka Malla's untimely death in 1197, violence erupted in the land. Within the next five years four rulers, including a woman—Lilavati—chief mahesi of Parakrama Bahu I—occupied the throne. The country was torn by rival, contending, political factions : the Kalinga party and the Sinhala-

Pandya group. One succeeding in overcoming the other for short periods. Generals on both sides wielded great power and influence, supporting princes and princesses they favoured, however slender their claim was to sovereignty.

Nissanka Malla's rightful heir was his son, Prince Virabahu. The king had declared his son's right to rule after him and had proclaimed the prince as uparaja in his inscriptions. But Virabahu ruled only for a single day, before "he fell into the power of death." His uncle, brother of Nissanka Malla, Vikkamabahu then enjoyed royal prerogatives for three months. He in turn was slain by Codanaga, son of a sister of Nissanka Malla. All this reveals that even within each separate faction there were bitter rivalries and searing jealousies ; a woeful lack of unity.

Shortly afterwards the Kalinga group was eclipsed by the Pandya-Sinhala faction led by the general Kittu, who upheld the sovereignty of Queen Lilavati, wife of Parakrama Bahu. Her ascendance lasted for a mere three years before the Kalinga clique once again succeeded in wresting power.

Sahasamalla, a prince of Kalinga, arrived in the island intending to take advantage of the disturbances in the country to entrench himself in power. With the assistance of

mercenaries recruited from the Cola kingdom, he deposed Lilavati and her general Kittī, and ruled for two years. Evidently he also scorned the assistance of the existent Kalinga faction for it was a general, Ayasmanta from this group who overcame Sahasamalla, and placed Kalyanavati on the throne.

“The general Ayasmanta a man of almost unsurpassable courage, a supporter of his royal family, prudently had the government carried on with wise policy by Kalyanavati, the first mahesi of Kittī-Nissanka (Nissanka Malla.)”

The personality of Kalyanavati is shrouded in the gory mists that envelope those turbulent years. But the few facts that emerge from the narrative convey that Kalyanavati was not merely a queen in name. She ruled Lanka for eight years, and hers was the longest reign in that lawless period. It may have been the loyal and capable Ayasmanta who firmly held the leash of power, and upheld her constantly in her exalted position, but the word ‘prudently’ used to describe her governing policy, sheds some light not only on the personality of her general, but on her own character as well.

Kalyanavati had at first been a stranger to the island, and the customs of its people.

However like Nissanka Malla she soon adjusted to her new environment, and felt welcome and at ease in the royal court. Many noble persons of her race had acquired high positions in governing circles, and in the armed forces, and had received many favours from King Parakrama Bahu I for their loyalty and devotion. By the time of that king's death the Kalinga faction was strongly established at court.

She was not altogether a stranger to the throne or a novice in statesmanship. For nine years she had reigned with Nissanka Malla as queen-consort. Kalyanavati remembered how tactfully her husband had ruled the country ; how often he had told her that a sovereign had to be constantly on the alert, sensitive to the moods of his people and very discreet in word and action. He too had been a total stranger but had soon realised that without the support of the Sangha he would not long wield absolute power. From the outset both wooed and won the respect, affection and allegiance of the Sangha.

This was accomplished in many ways. They lavishly bestowed charity on the religious communities of bhikkhus. Inscriptions record Tulabhara gifts—that is, gifts of precious stones, money, gold and silver equal

to the weight of the king and queen and their sons and daughters—freely distributed on ceremonial occasions. Kalyanavati benevolently maintained this practice when she ascended the throne in her own right.

Enormous sums of money were spent on building programmes and stupendous monuments were constructed in the king's brief reign. Among the religious buildings which Kalyanavati and her spouse erected in superb Polonnaruwa was a beautiful temple for the Tooth Relic, the famous Hatadage of novel design. The stupa known today as the Rankot dagoba was also enlarged and embellished "with a gold point" during her husband's reign. The ornate Vatadage (Round Relic House) and the graceful, elegant Nissanka-Lata-Mandapaya with its delicately-designed, lotus-head pillars ; a new palace complete with council chamber and audience hall were among other architectural achievements, the ruins of which remain to dazzle posterity with their magnificence.

Even more than all this Kalyanavati and her husband won the hearts of their subjects by the personal contact they established with the people during their extensive tours of the realm. King Nissanka Malla and Queen Kalyanavati visited the sixteen sacred places of the island ; those hallowed places of

pilgrimage sanctified by the Buddha himself, who visited each spot during his lifetime. Nissanka Malla's inscriptions record pilgrimages to Samantakuta, the mountain of Sri Pada ; the cave temples of Dambulla which he rebuilt and enhanced with seventy-three golden statues of the Master ; and many shrines in Ruhuna, coming in direct contact with thousands of his subjects and winning their popular support.

For a foreigner Kalyanavati therefore had the opportunity of seeing a great deal of the land of her adoption and acquiring a personal knowledge of its people, their ways and customs. All this naturally had its advantage when, at a critical moment in Lanka's history, her loyal general placed her on the throne. The people remembered the kind and gracious woman who had come among them, worshipped at their shrines and adjusted herself to their ways.

She herself was a Buddhist, for Buddhism prevailed in her homeland, and during her years as queen-consort of Lanka, she became deeply devoted to the religion and indulged in the practice of pious works.

When Kalyanavati became queen she endeavoured to foster Buddhism in the period of general decline that had set in, and many

noble and religious works are attributed to her by the Chronicler.

“The queen Kalyanavati, who was devoted to the Order of the Master, had a vihara called after her, built in the village Pannasalaka by name, for love of the village, and assigned it villages, fields, articles of use, slaves, gardens and so forth.”

She made generous endowments to the renowned Buddhist shrines in the island including the vihara at Devinuwara. It was too risky in those troublous times for her to make a journey to the spot, so violently had conditions changed since the peaceful, ordered years of her husband's reign, but she designated her Adikarin (minister) Deva to visit the town of Weligama near the shrine, ordering him to erect a vihara there and assign it to the great Community of monks.

Many inscriptions of Kalyanavati's reign exist in various parts of the island, and all relate to the good works she did. In Nissanka Malla's inscriptions, her name is frequently mentioned and this is further proof that she cooperated fully in his efforts to improve conditions in Lanka and stabilise the government. When it was her turn she remembered his ideals and methods and wisely followed his example in carrying out her onerous duties.

KALYANAVATI

Kalyanavati appears as a simple, charming princess ; a bulwark of unruffled feminine commonsense in an ocean of chaos and unruliness. Her success lay in her ability to conform to the times, and accept the modes and manners of life in an alien land ; adjusting and accommodating herself to varying and fast-changing situations ; coping as best as possible with circumstances without shedding her grace and dignity in the crises that beset her. She had early realised that the performance of good works and the maintenance of some degree of method and order was necessary if a sovereign was to remain in power and she was fortunate that her commander-in-chief was an able man, wholly devoted to the Kalinga cause ; himself a scion of a noble Kalinga family. Though to some extent he dominated her and we are left to imagine what their close personal relationship with each other was, both were fired by the same purpose. The promotion of Kalinga rule in Lanka, and the establishment of peace and harmony in a strife-torn land.

Unfortunately the times and circumstances were not conducive to the successful accomplishment of their plans. Surrounded by enemies who sought their downfall they could achieve but little.

One constructive object however was realised during her reign. Nissanka Malla had endeavoured to consolidate the legal structure of the kingdom according to the Brahmanical system by making the study of law a specialised profession, and his queen with the assistance of her competent general, commanded the compilation of a comprehensive book of law. For the first time the four social orders or castes "who had become impure through mixture" were clearly defined, according to the strict tenets of Brahmanical legal tradition.

There is much to admire in the character of this queen who through all the stresses and vicissitudes of her reign, yet attempted to give it at least a semblance of law and order, and strove to bring discipline and harmony into the lives of her subjects. Often she remembered with sharp nostalgia the tranquil, halcyon days of her husband's rule. In those not too distant times the people had been law-abiding, the country prosperous, the times propitious and Lanka at least outwardly at peace with her neighbours. By his wisdom, tact and firmness he had succeeded in quelling rebellious factions and winning over the main mass of people. How happy and contented she had been

then ; how satisfied with the results of their efforts.

How greatly she had enjoyed their journeys through the country she loved so well ; when people who now openly desired her death, hated and feared her, had courted and feted them. Now each time she ventured for a walk in the royal park, she had to take with her a strong, armed guard. But Ayasmanta assured her that even those soldiers could not be completely trusted. The palace itself was like a prison surrounded by armed men ; they stood guard outside her bed-chamber, and even her private shrine-room. Ayasmanta advised her to refrain from appearing unattended on her balcony ; so fearful was he of her safety, for assailants and assassins lurked in the most unlikely, unsuspected places, in spite of his keen vigilance, waiting to destroy her.

What quirk of Fate had placed her in this hazardous position? She was the highest in the land and at the same time the most susceptible to danger simply because she sat on Lanka's precarious throne. But she was not an ambitious woman and had not sought the umbrella of sovereignty. All unwillingly she had become the power-symbol of her people and now against her will, was bidden to do as they desired. Perhaps because she

cared for the man who had raised her to this lofty dignity, she had accepted the unwanted honour he had thrust upon her. She had been certain his motives were noble ; he had seen her as the sole, lawful heir of her husband, the king, when Nissanka Malla's own son and brother were slain. How could she have refrained from heeding him and accepting the awesome responsibility ? He understood her yearning for the seclusion and serenity of life far away from the palace—but he was as helpless as she was to assist her in fulfilling her wishes. What were personal desires and attachments worth anyway, at a critical time like this ? When the whole country was in distress did the longings of a woman, queen though she might be, matter ? Indeed simply because she was a queen she could not dare to succumb to her innermost urges as any other mortal might.

Kalyanavati cared for the noble Ayasmanta, not perhaps as she had loved her first husband, the excellent Nissanka Malla. But Ayasmanta never forgot that she was a queen, and he did not aspire to become her consort. He had other plans and if they came to pass he might grant her what she most cherished : the serenity of private life. Willingly she would give up her throne to

the infant son they both passionately desired would be born to them.

There are many different versions of the deposition of Queen Kalyanavati. The Culavamsa merely states that after her eight-year reign "... there reigned for one year a royal prince, Dhammasoka by name, who on coming to the throne was aged three months." The origin of this infant-prince is unknown but he must have been a Kalinga by birth because he too was placed on the throne by the king-maker Ayasmanta. It may well be the boy was the son of Queen Kalyanavati, fathered by her faithful general, and his birth ensured his mother's release from her heavy burden. The prince may perhaps have been a nephew or relative of hers, and she perhaps abdicated in his favour, while Ayasmanta continued in power. We can only surmise whether for some reason Kalyanavati fell from the good graces of the powerful general and was thereby deprived of her throne. But soon after she ceased to rule, the country that had known eight years of comparative peace, was plunged into turmoil once again.

"The Mahadipada Anikanga came at the head of a great army from the Cola kingdom, slew the ruler in Pultthinagara (Polonnaruwa) Prince Dhammasoka, together with the

general Ayasmanta and reigned seventeen days”

Her life was in great danger but according to a fragmentary inscription she was “. . . . carried away on the shoulders when Polonnaruwa was broken into during the Tamil insurrection.” It was certainly a dramatic way to flee and also shows that she was still well-beloved by her loyal retainers, who risked their lives to remove their royal mistress to a place of safety.

Kalyanavati did not regret her sudden departure but she mourned the man who had given his life for her cause. But as a queen she had lived in fear with tragedy at her heels. Now because of the Tamil invasion she was blessedly released from her arduous duties. Though her heart ached with sorrow for the plight of her kinsfolk and the tortured state of the country she loved and had made her own, she was yet glad and thankful to bury herself in the obscurity and oblivion that was her portion after she was deposed.

LILAVATI

THE MARRIAGE of the youthful Parakrama Bahu I to his beautiful, young cousin Princess Lilavati, was one of the measures taken to strengthen the ties between the kingdoms of Dakkinadesa and Ruhuna. Parakrama Bahu was overlord of Dakkinadesa after his uncle, Kitsirimegha's death.

Parakrama Bahu had a clear memory of his bride-to-be from their early childhood days together in her father's palace at Ruhuna. His mother was not in favour of her son's union with Queen Sugala's daughter, but realised it would not be expedient to show her opposition. She shrewdly perceived that a marriage between the cousins would allay any suspicions her relatives might have about her son's ambitions to overthrow them from power, and that the nuptials would bring even temporary feelings of goodwill and friendship between the families. Besides it would be well for her son not to antagonise the house of Ruhuna—yet.

So Parakrama Bahu and Lilavati were wed in her brother's palace at Atthasahassaka in Ruhuna, and returned to Sankhanathathali, Parakrama Bahu's capital city in Dakkinadesa. But Lilavati, a daughter of the

ill-starred house of Ruhuna, was not destined for a life of joy and happiness.

In those first fleeting years, while Parakrama Bahu worked to secure his kingdom, they lived in peace and harmony. Lilavati, in her youthful simplicity, did not comprehend that her gallant husband was also a bold and ambitious man. She had not yet discovered that quality of ruthlessness in his character. She did not perceive that ties of family, of blood and kith and kin ; even their relationship together meant little ; and that the only creature he truly loved more than he did himself was his mother, Queen Ratanavali.

Lilavati quivered at the thought of her mother-in-law. There was something cold and forbidding about her. The older woman's face was set in lines of harsh, majestic beauty, the dark eyes were heavy lidded and without expression. Her tread was soft, almost cat-footed and Lilavati never knew her mother-in-law had entered a room till she noticed her. It seemed Ratanavali was always watching, observing her—Lilavati ; spying on all her activities and movements ; listening to every word. Why, she wondered desperately.

She decided to tell her husband that she disliked his mother's actions. But some

spark of intuition prevented her doing so. She instinctively knew that the king would not tolerate criticism of his beloved mother. Lilavati remembered her own mother, the generous, warm-hearted, fearless Queen Sugala and longed for a sight of her dancing eyes full of gay humour, her smiling countenance and the sound of her voice.

Here it was very dull and quiet. There was so little fun. Her husband spent long hours each day closeted with his ministers. Talking, discussing, planning she could not imagine what. And if he was not occupied with his officials he was in deep conversation with his mother in the queen's chamber. Mother and son had so much to say to each other but she was never invited to share in their discussions. And though she longed for him, rarely did he come, her much-loved lord, to spend a few hours with her. And she was his wife.

There were only a few precious hours when the two of them walked in the picturesque parks Parakrama Bahu had laid out in his city : " Filled with numerous species of creepers and trees which bore fruits and blossoms, and which offered many delights and which were beautified by all kinds of garden beds . . . " The days she loved best were those infrequent ones spent in his

company in the three-storeyed royal pleasure house he had built on the island in the middle of the Parakrama Samudra. An exquisitely-designed building fit for a newly-wed king and queen. In how short a time had it been constructed !

Lilavati marvelled as she remembered that the Pandavapi tank which had been converted into a vast inland sea, had been just a small, insignificant reservoir when she had first come to Dakkinadesa a year or two ago. And he had not only accomplished this one miracle. Daily there were new tanks being built or old ones restored, vast acreages being brought under cultivation, gardens planted, canals, weirs and dams constructed. His prodigious energy, his insatiable desire for progress astonished her as it did his subjects.

His army which he personally supervised was growing from strength. Someone whispered to her that there were now thousands of soldiers enlisted in his troops. His generals were brave and loyal. Why did the king, her husband, need such a large, well-trained and equipped, highly disciplined army ? Was not their kingdom prosperous and at peace ? There had been no foreign invasions for a long time. And were not their own relatives ruling in other parts of the land ?

But there was his step on the wooden stairway and his voice, gay and full of laughter as he called her name. Lilavati sprang from her silk-draped couch and rushed to greet him with words of welcome. It was seldom he had time for her so early in the morning. And surprisingly he had come to take her out hunting. Her heart exulted.

Both were ardent followers of the chase. Lilavati laughed with the sheer joy of living as she mounted her horse. The king beside her, they set off at a steady gallop, followed by their ministers and retainers. Forgotten were all her fears and doubts. The look of sadness disappeared from her face, erased by the happiness she felt in her husband's presence.

Parakrama Bahu had returned the previous day from one of his frequent trips to the province of Malaya, which she had learned had been heavily fortified and garrisoned by the king. This time he had seemed satisfied with this journey. On arrival he had been tense and nervous and had gone quickly to his mother's room where he spent many hours. He had not spared a moment for his queen and her heart had been heavy with anguish as she fell asleep in the early hours of the morning, after a futile vigil for his coming. But now he had come to her and

in high spirits they entered the precincts of the forest. Lilavati drew her horse a little closer to her husband. But he was suddenly forging ahead, a look of fierce determination on his face. What was he planning to do ?

The king dismounted and ordered Lilavati to alight. He bid her take her stand on one side and seemingly unprotected. But she was courageous and implicitly believed no harm would come to her as long as her husband was by her side. He beckoned to his followers and hastily instructed them to surround the whole forest, spreading their nets and bearing their spears. They were also to make a loud noise here and there to drive the game out to the clearing in the centre. Lilavati pluckily stood her ground, her eyes fixed on the king, puzzled as to his motives but trusting fully in him.

“ Now when an elk bull large as an elephant calf, heard the frightening noise, he broke out of the forest thicket. Glancing on all sides, he roused by fear came running thence, plunging down the mountain slopes, leaping mountain gorges, cracking the tree branches, dragging creepers after it like a net, trampling down the brushwood in the forest, tearing asunder the outspread net, killing every one he met, or putting them to flight—thus he

dashed straight at the Mahesi, with the fury and the swiftness of the storm”

Lilavati's heart thudded. Her mouth was dry. She could not have screamed even if she wanted to. Death, she thought for one blinding, terrifying instant. Death is approaching in an ugly, rushing, evil blur, with a roar of flying hoofs and a pair of wild, bloodshot eyes. It is too soon and sudden to die like this—and where is he who alone can save me from this peril? Her eyes did not stir from his face, and she saw him rise on tiptoe, his chest heaving, his spear poised in his upraised, muscular arm. Surely he would not let an elk destroy her?

“Everybody who beheld him (the stag) rushing onwards fled on all sides, overcome by fright, and left the mahesi and the king in the lurch. When the king beheld the fearful stag approaching he ran towards him with terrible courage and hit him with hurled spear.”

Lilavati closed her eyes. Her invincible husband had, incredibly, failed. He had failed to kill the enraged animal. He had only wounded it. A despairing whimper escaped her. It could not be that the mighty Parakrama Bahu had failed to kill a stag! Now the desperate, bleeding animal, angry

with pain, would hurl itself upon her. In a few brief seconds it would all be over.

But no, the animal no longer charged in her direction. Instead it faced the king. It was her husband the stag now sought to attack. What could she do to save the man she loved? She was helpless. She could only watch. There was not even a stone nearby and they had taken her spear from her when she dismounted from her horse.

"Wounded by him (the king) the stag lowered its head to slay the king, but shedding both its antlers, flung itself at his feet."

Lilavati gasped. What did this mean? Such a thing never happened before. A wounded animal kneeling before a human being—king though he might be? It was a miracle! A surge of warmth passed through her chilled body and the stiffness disappeared from her limbs. She rushed to her husband's side, gazing into his face with awe and astonishment. Was he really divine, she wondered, as some of his courtiers believed and whispered?

"The ministers, the hunters, the chamberlains and the others, hearing the cry that the animal gave forth after receiving its severe wound, turning back, came together from all sides. When they beheld the antlers and the lion-hearted ruler they were full of

LILAVATI

astonishment, and overjoyed and happy, they filled the whole forest with the clamour of their loud praises."

Long years after when the glory and splendour had passed and love itself was but a poignant memory, Lilavati recalled how they had entered the city in triumph that glorious morning. His courtiers surrounding their dauntless king, showering praises on them. She remembered the great feast that followed and the magnificent reception in the golden pavilion of the palace that evening. The songs and dances of the talented artistes who thronged the court of Dakkinadesa, and the music reverberating through the halls; its rhythm beating in her body, filling her cup to overflowing. Only the dark, sinister eyes of Queen Ratanavali had cast a shadow on her happiness.

The years passed and with them fled the serenity and security Lilavati had known in the early years of her marriage. Parakrama Bahu, aided and goaded by his mother, embarked on his path of aggression and conquest. He was obsessed with the purpose he had nurtured since boyhood : the unification of Lanka under the parasol of his sovereignty. He had no time to spare his chief mahesi, and now that her brother, Prince Manabharana was implacably opposed

to him, Parakrama Bahu, influenced considerably by his mother, suspected Lilavati of all manner of intrigue. Day and night she was spied on, her movements restricted, her loyal attendants dismissed from her service and Ratanavali's own servants detailed to wait upon her.

She was torn between anxiety for her much-loved brother and love for her bold, ambitious husband. But her loyalties were not divided. Her husband's welfare and his ultimate success in whatever he undertook was what she earnestly desired. But she was forced to admit that her love was unrequited ; that she was now his chief mahesi only in name. In her moments of despair there was no one to share or ease her sorrow.

Very little news trickled to her of the king's campaigns. She was aware that his course was not a smooth one. Her people in Ruhuna were relentlessly resisting his bold plans. Almost a prisoner in the palace she rarely even saw the king, but at least it was a relief to be spared the sight of his mother, who now hardly left her son's side. The news at last reached her that King Gajabahu, their cousin, was dead and her own brother ignominiously vanquished, a desperate fugitive fleeing to the safety of his domain by mercy of the king, her husband.

Soon the summons came to her. She had not expected to be sent for, but at least her husband had not overlooked the outward semblance of honour and dignity due to her as his chief queen. As she approached the city of Polonnaruwa she learned he had already been crowned and consecrated king of Lanka for the second time. He had decided to reign alone, and did not carry out the ceremony of consecrating a consort. Lilavati smiled bitterly as the carriage rocked and rumbled along the dusty, gravel road.

So this was Polonnaruwa. The city he had ardently desired to possess. Battered, ruined, rubble-strewn, battle-scarred. Had it really been the splendid royal capital of her venerable great-grandfather, the mighty hero Vijayabahu? However, shabby as it was now, it would soon be one of the most beautiful cities in the world; a dazzling jewel of a town, superbly laid out, filled with imposing buildings and colossal shrines; well-planned parks and gardens; a magnificent royal palace and numerous ornate bathing pools: a city Parakrama Bahu's people would be proud of and commemorate in song and story for ages to come. She recalled how he had transformed Dakkinadesa. How much more then would he glorify

this city which at last after so much stress and toil had become his own.

Though her name is never once mentioned in the Culavamsa account of the king's long reign, Lilavati's later history proved that though she was overshadowed by other, better-loved and more popular queens, ignored to a great extent by the king, few failed to remember that she was a royal princess in her own right, when the opportune time came.

When rebellion broke out in Ruhuna in the early years of Parakrama Bahu's reign, the poor woman fell into even greater disfavour with her husband and his court. Once again she was placed under strict surveillance, prevented from any social contact. She was the offspring of the rash and irrepressible, rebel-queen Sugala and what after all was there to prevent her from sending valuable information, if she could only glean it, to her mother ?

The tragedy of Lilavati was that Parakrama Bahu never once realised how completely and devotedly she loved him. Perhaps it was partly her own fault. Afflicted with the pride of all Vijayabahu's descendants, she could never bring herself to talk freely or openly display her deep, sincere feelings to her husband.

She bore her misfortune with fortitude and watched helplessly as the lighthearted, loving Rupavati captured the affection of the king. Had she borne a son, she might have had some influence over her husband. But while lesser queens bore his daughters she herself was denied such fulfilment.

After the conquest of Ruhuna and her beloved mother's death in captivity, Lilavati adjusted to the pattern of her days. Law and order had been established in the land so that "even a woman might traverse the island with a precious jewel and not be asked what it was." Life in the royal court had many compensations for a highborn woman. Lavish entertainments and amusements were frequent. On festival days the whole city rejoiced. Once the dangers from rebels were overcome Lilavati was no longer treated as a suspect in the palace. She had her own small coterie of loyal friends and relatives and the king though indifferent treated her with due respect and he commanded that none persecute her in any way. The months went by quietly, and there was little to disturb the even tenor of her life. There was comfort in the thought that she was growing older, more detached from worldly desires and less bound to her fiery emotions.

And then the great glass bowl of palace life was shattered. The peace so dearly and so firmly established was disrupted. Parakrama Bahu died without male offspring.

A Kalinga prince, his youngest sister's son, became king as Vijayabahu II. For a short time there was an illusion of well being in the kingdom. But after a year Vijayabahu was assassinated by a kesadhatu (nobleman and courtier) named Mahinda. Mahinda however was not permitted to rule for more than five days. He was slain by the rightful heir, the uparaja of Vijayabahu II, Kitti Nissanka, believed by some scholars to be the son-in-law of King Parakrama Bahu I, and known to posterity as Nissanka Malla.

Lilavati, who like some of her relatives had retired from the chaos and disorder that prevailed, especially as the Kalinga side of her husband's family were in power, was suddenly pushed into the limelight. After Vikkamabahu's death his nephew Codanaga reigned briefly. But Kitti, a courageous and crafty general, decided to take a hand in government. The majority of the armed forces supported him at this critical juncture and he staged a bold coup, deposed Codanaga whom he blinded and sent into exile, and placed Queen Lilavati on the throne.

LILAVATI

“The powerful general Kittu had the government carried on for three years without mishap by Lilavati, the first mahesi of the sovereign Parakrama Bahu.”

Lilavati was no imposter. She had some right to the throne of Lanka through her descent from King Vijayabahu I, and she was also the natural leader of the Pandya-Sinhala faction at court. At last she had been given recognition. The woman who for many years had taken a lower place, who had been slighted and ignored, insulted and humiliated, was raised to the monarchy. Sugala's revenge was complete. True some might consider Lilavati a mere puppet in the hands of her able general, but yet she was queen of the land, and with his help succeeded in governing for three years “without mishap.” Perhaps she had the natural genius of her family for kingship. The image acted on her mind like a sura-draught; she was exhilarated, animated, intoxicated with her good fortune, but alas, it did not last long.

The Kalinga prince Sahasamalla, a step-brother of Nissanka Malla, liquidated Kittu with the aid of a considerable force of Colas from the Indian sub-continent, and Lilavati was shorn of her brief glory.

WOMEN OF THE MAHAVAMSA

But twice more in the troubled decade that followed, Lilavati became sovereign ruler of Lanka ; supported on both occasions by generals of the army loyal to the Pandya faction. It seems easy to dismiss her as a mere tool in the hands of these ambitious men, who regarded her chiefly as means to obtaining and wielding power. But Lilavati had inherited the sturdy qualities of her forbears. She who was the daughter of the valorous royal house of Ruhuna possessed their boundless ambition. Or else would she have been willing to sit three times on a precarious throne, surrounded by unscrupulous enemies, at a time when danger and death lurked fearfully close to royalty ?

On the second occasion she came to the throne with the aid of Vikkantacamunakka, who is described in the Culavamsa as "the villain." She reigned for only one year. It was during those twelve months that the elaborate Pali poem about the history of the sacred Tooth Relic, the "Datthavamsa," was composed by the monk Dhammakitti. He was also the author of the first part of the Culavamsa. Dhammakitti's "splendid hero" whom he lavishly praised in this Chronicle was of course Lilavati's husband, the great Parakrama Bahu. A considerable number of copper coins, bearing her name

were minted and issued during the time.

After being deposed for four months, Lilavati was again raised to the throne. This time, the royal consecration that had been denied her, was performed with all possible splendour. No doubt to make her position more secure. Her royal general, the influential and powerful nobleman Parakkama "... consecrated the Mahesi Lilavati who came of the dynasty of the Sun and the Moon, in the royal dignity, she who afterward shone in royal splendour." Lilavati had reached the zenith of her chequered career.

But the trail of misfortune that dogged her since youth and struck her ill-fated house, overtook her once more. She had reigned for only a short seven months before colossal destruction was wreaked on the kingdom of Lanka. It first appeared in the person of the Prince Parakkama who led the Pandu army against the queen, deposing her and her general. But Parakkama reigned only for three years before he was overthrown and murdered by the terrible and sinister tyrant Magha from Kalinga, "... a man who held to a false creed, whose heart rejoiced in bad statesmanship, who was a forest fire ... to harrass the kingdom of Lanka."

WOMEN OF THE MAHAVAMSA

In the torment and agony of the years that followed, the remorseless persecutions and oppressions, disorder and confusion that reigned unfettered for twenty one years, a whole civilisation was swept away. A way of life that was revered and cherished was destroyed in "the great scorching fire" Magha's rule. A distraught, beaten, down-trodden people had no choice but to submit to the tyrant's autocratic and unjust rule that extended to the remote corners of the land.

We do not know if the unhappy Queen Lilavati escaped the cruel indignities and tortures that were inflicted on many of those who dared to oppose the usurper-king. But history does not record her passing, or the fate of those who shared her brief spells of glory.



